



The Mythical Hero's

Author: Tatematsuri

Illustrator: Ruria Miyuki

Otherworld Chronicles







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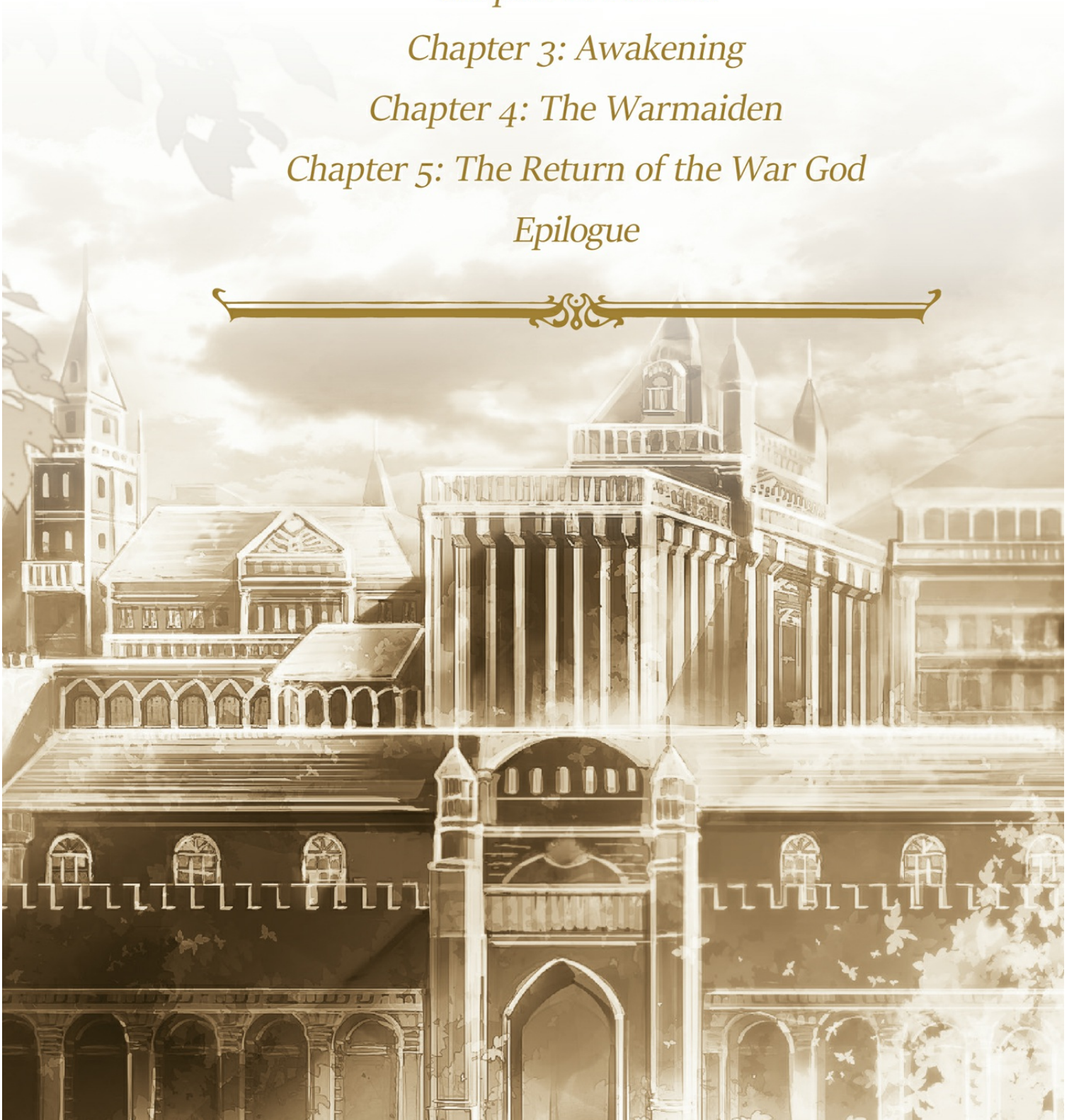
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Prologue

They cheered for him alone.

Every voice rang with joy as it blessed his name. Every face thronging the palace courtyard beamed with unreserved happiness. Every gaze was fixed on him, the young boy looking down on them from the balcony.

Not so long ago, their nation had teetered on the brink of destruction. Now the world knew them as proud rulers of the central continent of Soleil. It was all thanks to him—he who stood by their king through thick and thin, who held firm in times of hardship and despair, who guided their armies to victory in countless battles.

He raised one hand in acknowledgment and retreated from the balcony. Behind him, the roar of the crowd continued unabated. The city would not sleep tonight, nor in the nights to come. War-torn castle walls and ruined houses still wanted for repair, but rebuilding would come later. Now was a time for celebration, for now they were conquerors, the first nation in history to bring all of Soleil beneath their banner. The festivities would last for many days yet.

The boy made his way back inside the palace, along the passage linking balcony and throne room. A springy carpet of deep red cloth ran the length of the corridor, hemmed in on either side by spotless walls of white stone. As he walked on in silence, a young man appeared to block his path.

“Do you truly mean to leave?” the young man asked. His sadness was written on his face.

The boy hesitated for a moment, then nodded. “I’d love to stay, but you know how it is. Home is home.”

Of all the people of Soleil, he was surely the first and last permitted to address this young man—his king—so casually. Anybody else would have been

harshly punished for their impertinence, if not executed outright. But he and the king were fast friends, so his familiarity prompted a smile rather than a rebuke.

“I had hoped you might come to call this land home. You are a hero to my people, after all. I could furnish you with a suitable title, and you could live out your days in the peace and prosperity you helped build. Would you still turn me down?”

“All the more reason to leave,” the boy replied. “Your nation loves its politics. It’s statesmen your age of peace will need, not generals. Better to send me on my way now than put up with a jobless has-been mooching off your coffers.”

The king’s elegant brow furrowed with sorrow. “You will not be persuaded, then?”

“I’m afraid not.”

“I see.”

They had crawled through the muck together. They had shared uncommon shame and disgrace. Through all the king’s trials, this boy had stayed stubbornly by his side, believing in him and his crumbling nation to the last. They were comrades-in-arms, friends, brothers, and they knew each other’s hearts inside and out. It was that very friendship that told him now the boy’s mind would not be changed.

He shook his head in resignation. “Take this, then,” he said, tossing an object through the air. The boy caught it and scrutinized it warily. It was a plain piece of stiff white paper, like a blank bookmark. The king grinned like a child up to mischief. “Or else I’ll insist you stay.”

The boy laughed. “No, I’ll take it. What is it, though? I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“You’ll find out when the time is right. Although I can’t imagine you’ll have need of it in your world, from what you’ve told me of the place.”

His piece said, the king turned away and set off down the hall. The boy watched him go. After a few steps, the king stopped and looked back over his shoulder.

“Consider this my goodbye. You know my opinions on tearful farewells, I trust.” He paused for a moment, as though mourning their parting. “I don’t intend to see you off. Be well.”

“You too,” the boy replied. “It’s been fun.”

“That it has, my friend. That it has.”

And so a tale of heroes came to an end.

“...and that’s when I woke up.”

With an intense gleam in his eyes, Hiro Oguro finished his story. He was a perfectly ordinary second-year high school student. This year, he would turn seventeen.

“Uh...cool. Sounds great, man.”

His friend Fukutaro was giving him some serious side-eye. Fukutaro and Hiro were both second-years and had known each other since they were little, but they couldn’t have looked more different. With his naturally tall and muscular physique, Fukutaro was twice Hiro’s size.

“What, you don’t believe me?” Hiro asked.

“Believe what? You had a dream, dude. I get crazy dreams all the time.”

“I guess...” His friend had a point. Hiro decided to change the subject before things got awkward. “So anyway, your mom told me you got an acceptance letter?”

Fukutaro grimaced, muttering something about “sticking her nose into other people’s business” before shrugging in defeat. “Can’t believe they’re sendin’ those out to second-years.”

“Is it really that weird?” Hiro asked. “I mean, you’re the judo club’s star member.”

“It’s all comin’ too soon, man. University’s so far away, it doesn’t even feel like a real place.” Fukutaro scratched his head, clearly uncomfortable. He fixed Hiro with a meaningful look. “You’re the one we should be worrying about, anyhow. You gotten back into clubs yet?”

“You know what the doctor says. No strenuous physical activity.”

Fukutaro’s gaze softened. “C’mon, man, it’s been three years already. It’s about time they let you go for a jog. Didn’t you have a checkup yesterday?”

Hiro’s medical checkups dated back to a bizarre incident three years earlier. Until the day it had happened, he’d by all accounts been in good health. When his mother had come to wake him that morning, however, she’d screamed at what she’d found: her son lying in bed, naked and horribly gaunt. That in itself might not have been so bad, but he was inexplicably covered in injuries and smeared with dirt, and his short hair had somehow grown down to his shoulders.

He was immediately rushed to hospital, where he underwent a thorough medical examination. Among other things, the doctors had found that Hiro was suffering from dislocated shoulders, torn muscles, and various fractured bones. His lacerations showed signs of having been treated, but their crude stitches ensured they would leave permanent scars. The discovery that several were infected put the nail in the coffin: he was not to go home any time soon.

On top of everything else, Hiro had no memory whatsoever of how he had come by his injuries. This proved unfortunate for his worried parents, as the hospital came to suspect he was a victim of child abuse and contacted the police, who in turn called them in for questioning. The mental toll of being accused of causing their own son’s condition must have been incalculable.

“Yeah, but...it sounds like I still need a bit more time.”

While his memories had never returned, Hiro had eventually made a perfect physical recovery. He had long since received the all-clear for strenuous exercise. He was avoiding clubs for another reason entirely: for the past three years, he’d been experiencing residual side effects that not even his doctor knew about. Reluctant to worry his family and friends, he had chosen to step back from physical activities.

“Right. Sorry. Dumb of me to ask.” Fukutaro fell silent for a few seconds. For a moment, Hiro worried that he was beating himself up, but when his friend next opened his mouth, he was back to his normal cheerful self.

“I gotta tell you, man, I barely even recognized you at first. Damn near gave

me a heart attack. You looked like you'd been stuck in the jungle for a decade with that mop on your head."

"It was down to my waist, yeah. I remember. My mom said the same thing."

"Plus you were weirdly muscular too. How'd you get that ripped in one night?"

"It's my signature skill." Hiro grinned. "I powerlevel while I'm sleeping."

"You wish!" With a bark of laughter, Fukutaro jabbed his friend playfully on the shoulder. Or at least, he tried to.

As Fukutaro's fist approached, something stirred in Hiro's chest. Before he even registered he was moving, he slid his leg sideways to neatly dodge the punch, then launched himself forward, inside the reach of Fukutaro's arms.

"Well...uh..." Fukutaro stammered, his shock plain to see. "Looks like those crazy reflexes of yours are still workin' all right." His eyes were fixed on Hiro's upraised fist, hovering millimeters from his chin.

"Oh, crap! Sorry!" Flustered, Hiro took a step back...and as he did, he noticed something strange. Fukutaro was frozen in place, sweat beading on his forehead, face locked in wide-eyed surprise.

"Huh? What now?" Hiro shot him an exasperated smile. Not even children would try to pull this one nowadays. He waved his hand in front of Fukutaro's face, but his friend didn't move a muscle. "Cut it out. We'll be late to class." He gave Fukutaro an exasperated shake, with no result. "How long are you gonna stand there like an idiot? Come on, this is embarrassing."

Hiro glanced around to check if anyone was staring and beheld a sight as incomprehensible as it was bizarre.

The world had stopped.

Whatever was affecting Fukutaro, he was far from the only one. The pedestrians around them had halted in their tracks, as had the crows pecking at garbage bags in front of houses and the cat hissing at an elementary schooler by the roadside. Even the sun shining proudly down on them stood stock-still in the heavens, along with the white clouds drifting across the blue sky. Every

element of the everyday scene hung frozen in time.

“What the hell?”

Hiro’s jaw hung slack as he struggled to process what he was seeing. Clinging to a faint hope, he approached a nearby schoolgirl.

“Umm...” He opened his mouth hesitantly. “This is all just a prank, right?”

He knew how clichéd the question sounded, but nothing else came to mind. The schoolgirl didn’t respond, as he knew in his heart she wouldn’t. Thinking about it rationally, no one would set up a prank on this scale just to spook one unremarkable high schooler.

“Even if they did, how would they pull it off?” Over and over, he looked around, hoping for something to change, but the world remained stubbornly frozen. He gave a strained chuckle. “You’ve gotta be kidding me.”

White noise filled his head. His legs turned to jelly. The pounding in his chest grew gradually more panicked. He desperately needed to do something, *anything*, but what was there to do? Tears sprang to his eyes as a wave of fear swept over him.

What would you do if you were in my place?

His soul cried for help to his comrade-in-arms.

What would you say to see me in this sorry state?

Would he have been ready with an encouraging smile, or a disdainful rebuke?

I don’t get it. Who am I talking to? What am I even thinking?

Hiro’s vision grew dim, as though he were falling into slumber.

(Lean on me in times of doubt, as I shall lean on you. For we are brothers, are we not?)

From the distant past, his comrade’s words returned, carrying a young man’s voice and likeness with them in vivid color.

(At times I played the elder, at times the younger, but we were always family.)

The only family he had on the other side.

(Should you need succor, should you need aid, there is no shame in seeking it in me.)

But how can I, when you don't exist in this world?

He had given up everything he'd worked for, thrown away all he'd gained, and fled back home to his own world. In the back of his mind, he wondered—did he even have the right to ask for help?

(Come, my friend. My brother. Though many trials await you, none may sever the bond we share.)

As Hiro fell away into darkness, he could have sworn a familiar young man appeared before his eyes.

Chapter 1: A Fateful Encounter

A fierce glare filtered through Hiro's eyelids to prick at his retinas, rousing him to wakefulness. He raised a hand to shade his face and gingerly opened his eyes. The first thing he saw was a great tree, grown giant with age, towering into the sky above him. Sunlight spilled down through the gaps in its tangle of leaves and branches.

He eased himself upright and looked around. Trees stretched away all around him, more than he could count, so thickly clustered that he could not see what lay beyond. Curiously, nothing about the sight struck him as particularly uncanny. If anything, the opposite was true. He might have panicked or screamed or burst into tears, but the forest's gentle air seemed to put him at ease. Still, the silence eventually grew too uncomfortable to bear.

"Where the hell am I?" he asked out loud. It was another clichéd line, he knew, but with everything that was happening, his brain didn't seem to have room for anything else.

Fronds and foliage brushed against his hands. The wind carried the scents of the natural world into his nostrils. He was lying not on hard asphalt, but amid lush greenery. For all that he remembered walking to school only a few minutes before, his senses told him this was too real to be a dream.

"Well, if this *is* a dream, I've gotta wake up sometime," he said, trying to reassure himself. Soon, surely, he would open his eyes and find himself back in his room, cringing with embarrassment to think how scared he'd been. "Guess I might as well explore while I wait."

Doing his best to ignore his nagging doubts, Hiro stood up from the great tree's roots and set out into the forest. However, it never seemed to end. On and on he trudged, but the press of trees remained as dense as ever, too thick to see through even if he squinted. Eventually, he despaired and stopped, on the point of giving up all hope.

Then he realized he was not alone.

From the shadows between the boughs, two golden eyes fixed him with a burning gaze. Leaf litter crunched beneath heavy paws as a beast stepped surely from the undergrowth. It advanced on him, its throat rumbling with a low growl. Drool dripped to the ground from its long fangs in anticipation of a coming meal.

“Is that...a wolf?”

The animal was about as large as a medium-sized dog. As it padded through the dappled sunlight filtering through the forest canopy, Hiro realized that its coat was pure white. Its legs bulged with muscles, ending in long-clawed paws that gouged ruts into the forest floor with every step. Hiro whimpered as it drew closer, bracing for it to pounce.

Instead, the wolf stopped and maintained a steady distance.

Is it...scared of me?

If so, perhaps he might be able to get away. Most wild animals were scared of fire, he knew, but he had no way of producing it here. In that case, his next best option was to maintain eye contact and back away slowly. That was what he’d seen on TV once, anyway. Now that advice might save his life.

Hiro locked eyes with the wolf and took one step back. The wolf took one step forward.

He took another step back. The wolf took another step forward.

A third step back. A third step forward.

This was clearly going nowhere fast. Aside from anything else, he had no idea how far he was supposed to back up or even in which direction he ought to run.

And that’s assuming this thing doesn’t follow me through the whole forest...

The wolf didn’t seem to care much about Hiro’s dismay. It sat down on its haunches, gave a toothy yawn, and scratched its ear disinterestedly with a rear leg for a time. Finally, it arched its back like a cat and lay down on the ground. It might have seemed docile if its golden eyes hadn’t remained fixed on Hiro all the while. *Don’t think I’ve forgotten about you*, they seemed to say. *Move a muscle and lose a limb.*

The minutes dragged on as the pair stared at one another. Suddenly, the wolf's ears pricked up, and it rose to its feet. The nearby foliage began to rustle with movement. For a moment, Hiro feared another wolf, but instead a beautiful girl emerged from the undergrowth.

"Hmm?" She looked at him curiously. "Who are you?"

Drying her wet hair with a cloth, she moved to stand beside the wolf. She laid a hand on its head and scratched it affectionately, though her gaze never moved from Hiro as he looked on in silence.

She cocked her head at him quizzically. "Excuse me. I asked you a question."

Hiro jumped. "Erm...you mean...m-me?"

"Who else could I mean?"

Although Hiro wouldn't dream of telling her, the sight of her had left him tongue-tied. Her glossy crimson hair shimmered like living flame as it fell to her shoulders in silky strands. Though her shapely face still retained some youthful roundness, her eyes shone like cut rubies and smoldered with a fiery will. Faint blue veins pulsed with life beneath her porcelain skin.

Hiro noted regretfully that what God had given her in loveliness, he had taken from her in womanly charm, but her modest chest promised to fill out with age and in the meantime did nothing to detract from her beauty.



Hiro laughed awkwardly. “Right. Of course. Um...I’m Hiro. Hiro Oguro.” He couldn’t stand there like a statue forever. He might as well give her his name.

The girl tilted her head and stared pensively up into space. “Hi-ro...Oh-guro?” The name sounded foreign in her mouth.

“Just Hiro is fine, if the whole thing’s too much.”

“Very well. Hiro it is. So? What are you doing here?”

Hiro gave a self-deprecating smile. “Trying to find a way out.”

“Hmm...” She furrowed her brow as she looked him up and down, seeming to evaluate him. If she was, it only took her a second. “Well, you seem the honest type. If you want to leave the forest, it’s this way.”

The crimson-haired girl set off, gesturing for Hiro to follow. He hurriedly fell into line behind her. The wolf slipped in between them, like a bodyguard protecting its charge.

Hiro couldn’t say how long he trudged on, watching the wolf’s white tail sweep from side to side, but eventually he looked up to find shafts of light streaming through the thinning trees ahead. They’d reached the forest’s edge. After spending so long searching in vain for an escape, he couldn’t help but wonder if the woods had played some trick on him. *It couldn’t have been that easy the whole time*, he protested to himself as he stepped between the trees and out into the light.

The sight that greeted him took his breath away, leaving him blinking in astonishment. Overhead, a blazing sun sat enthroned in a cloudless azure sky, lord of all it surveyed. Its abundant rays showered the land below, where an endless expanse of grassy plains shimmered in the breeze.

As Hiro gazed out across the vista in wonder, he noticed a strange company approaching from the corner of his eye. They rode up on warhorses, all abreast—soldiers clad in heavy armor, with carefully polished spears in hand and swords at their belts. Their haughty eyes burned with hostility. Hiro quailed under their glares.

One rider urged his horse forward from the group. He wore a great scar on his

cheek, and his formidable bearing marked him as a seasoned warrior. He shot Hiro a single hawkish glance before turning his attention to the crimson-haired girl.

“Another of your bathing trips, my lady?”

“What can I say?” Her tone was defiant. “I needed it after practice.”

His eyes narrowed. “You were foolish to go unguarded.”

“I was very well guarded, I’ll have you know. Wasn’t I, Cerberus?” She petted the white wolf’s head, prompting a cheerful bark.

The armored man seemed to struggle for words for a moment, then shook his head in exasperation. He might have been an older brother trying to handle a willful younger sister.

“Well?” He jerked his thumb at Hiro. “Who’s this brat tagging along with you?”

“Me? Err...I got lost in the forest. I’m nobody important, so...um...I’ll just be going.” Hiro forced his mouth into what he hoped was an innocent smile.

“You dare mock me, boy?”

Judging from the vein throbbing on the man’s forehead, Hiro hadn’t been very convincing.

“His name’s Hiro,” the girl chimed in, laying a hand on Hiro’s shoulder. “We only just met, but we’re practically best friends already! Isn’t that right?”

She spun around in front of him to gaze directly into his eyes. Hiro promptly flushed bright scarlet. He wasn’t used to any girl getting so close to him, let alone one so unusually pretty.

“Y-Yeah, I guess,” he stammered, desperate to say something to mask his embarrassment. “I-I mean, what is a friend, really, when you think about it?”

Cerberus gave a *ruff* of what sounded like agreement.

Unsurprisingly, the scar-faced man was not so easily convinced. “Your friend? This ruffian? You must think me born yesterday, my lady.” He looked Hiro over with naked suspicion. “What are those strange garments of his? Such garb was

made nowhere in the empire.”

It was true that Hiro was the odd one out in his modern-day school uniform, although from his perspective, it was the others, with their armor and swords, who were dressed strangely.

“I’ve never seen an imperial citizen with a face like his, nor his hair besides. Where did you come from, boy?”

Only now did it click in Hiro’s mind that none of the faces looking down on him were remotely Japanese. Their hair was exclusively blond or brown, with not a hint of Hiro’s black coloring. Looking closer, their features were more pronounced than his own, their noses longer, their chests broader. Every one of the men could have been twice his size.

As his eyes widened in shock, the girl, who had now returned to his side, tapped him on the shoulder. He turned around to find her gorgeous face inches from his nose.

“See how gentle his face is? And he’s got such big, round eyes. He’s just like Cerberus when she was a puppy.”

If someone had nudged either of them from behind, their lips might have touched. A sweet scent tickled Hiro’s nostrils. Oblivious to his distress, the girl broke into a radiant smile.

“I think he looks lovely!” she declared.

“I...uh... Thanks,” Hiro managed, too flustered to muster a proper response.

“Cat got your tongue, boy? A guilty conscience, no doubt. I take it you realize where you’ve strayed.”

“Oh, Dios, there’s no need to be so threatening. He’s only a child. Look, you’re scaring him!”

“Child or not, my lady, he is not to be trusted.”

Hiro’s ears pricked up at that. It was one thing for this man—Dios, the girl had said—to call him a child, but for a girl clearly his junior to do the same? He began to suspect a grave misunderstanding at play.

“Why not? He’s so adorable!”

“It is not whether he is *adorable* that I question—”

Hiro raised his hand, cutting Dios off. “Erm...excuse me...”

“What is it?” The girl turned around, flashing him a motherly smile, though her compassion only stung, knowing it was intended for a child.

“I know I don’t look it,” he said, “but I’m sixteen. I’ll be seventeen this year.”

“No way! You mean...you’re *older* than me?”

The girl looked so betrayed, Hiro had to remind himself he’d done nothing wrong. At her side, Dios’s jaw hung open in astonishment.

The girl rounded on Hiro in disbelief. “Sixteen? Are you sure? I thought you were ten!”

“Very sure. And I’m definitely not ten.”

It wasn’t uncommon to hear that Japanese people looked younger than they really were. In addition, Hiro only stood at five foot five, short for a second-year and barely taller than the crimson-haired girl. With his youthful face and features on top of that, it was little wonder his words rang hollow. As he racked his brain for a way to convince them of the truth, Dios looked him over with a piercing gaze.

“Could he be some manner of spirit?” the man wondered aloud.

“Oh, right! That would explain what he was doing in the forest! But no, hold on. How would a spirit get lost?”

For a moment, the girl had looked satisfied with Dios’s explanation, but then she cocked her head and struck a thoughtful pose. Her face was remarkably expressive. It was rather entertaining to watch, but Hiro didn’t have long to enjoy it before Dios urged his horse forward, heightening the tension once more.

“The boy must come with us,” Dios announced.

The girl looked scandalized. “What? He can’t! His parents must be searching for him as we speak. We have to get him home.”

“He is sixteen years of age, is he not? That is old enough to be held

responsible for his actions. He has trespassed upon the royal family's private land. We must take him back to the fort for questioning."

"Can't we just let him go?" she protested. "It's not like he can do us any harm."

"He may be a spy dispatched by your enemies."

"Do you really think that's likely?"

"I think we cannot take the risk." Dios's tone made it clear he would brook no further argument.

"Fine, but he gets to ride in my carriage. You won't object to *that*, I hope."

The girl clearly wasn't going to give any more ground. Dios must have sensed that as well, because he furrowed his brow and sighed. "As you wish, my lady. Let us return to the fort." He turned his horse about and rode back to his men.

In his place, an ornately decorated carriage trundled forward. It rumbled to a stop before Hiro.

"Go on, get in," the girl prompted. "Don't worry, there's plenty of space."

Hiro peered inside as Cerberus bounded through the door. The interior of the carriage was spacious enough for six people to sit comfortably. He stepped in, skirted around the white wolf making itself comfortable on the floor, and took his place on one of the seats. The girl climbed in last, seating herself opposite him.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I'm sure this must all be very alarming for you."

"No worries," Hiro replied. "It's all just a dream, anyway. It's not your fault." Even now, his mind still refused to acknowledge that this was reality.

The girl cocked her head. "A dream?"

"I mean, it has to be, right? None of this makes sense otherwise."

"What doesn't make sense?"

"I mean, I was walking to school like usual, then before I knew it, I was lying in that forest. Suddenly ending up somewhere else, filled with people you've never met...that's the sort of thing that only happens in dreams."

“Maybe. You seem real enough to me, though. I mean, you’re right there.”

The girl abruptly stood up from her seat and leaned over. Hiro was still wondering what she was doing when he felt the warmth of her hand against his face. He barely had time to register the softness of her touch, before—

“Yeeeeooowch!”

She grabbed his cheek between her fingers and pinched hard.

“Well? Does that hurt?”

“Whass dhat fhor?!” he yelled, his stretched mouth distorting his words. On the floor, Cerberus’s eyes widened in alarm.

The girl released his cheek and sat back down, satisfied. “See? Now we know you’re not dreaming.”

“That doesn’t mean you can just pinch me out of nowhere!”

“Sorry. I didn’t want to hurt you, but I thought it would be the fastest way.”

Hiro wanted to retort, but her innocent smile made it impossible to stay angry, so he resorted to sulking instead. What was she going to do if this awakened something in him? As he nursed his cheek in silence, there came a rapping at the carriage window. Dios’s accusing glare appeared on the other side of the glass.

“Is something the matter?” he asked.

“Not at all,” the girl replied blithely. “Hiro was just worried he might be dreaming, so I pinched his cheek to check.”

“Denying reality, is he? Perhaps the boy truly is a spy.” With that, Dios pulled away from the window.

Still rubbing his stinging cheek, Hiro heaved a sigh. In his head, he’d known all along that this was no dream, but his heart had been unwilling to let go of that final hope.

“So what do I do now?” Gazing at his feet, he cradled his head in his hands. As shameful as it was that it had taken a pinch to bring him to his senses, there was no getting around the facts: he’d somehow traveled to another world. How

could he get back home? *Could* he get back home? Could he even wriggle out of his current predicament? Questions loomed before him one after another, but he had no answers.

“Are you all right?” The girl reached over from the opposite seat to pat his hair. “Come on, don’t look so glum. They won’t execute you.”

“That’s not why I’m... Wait, what was that last bit?”

“Come to think of it, I never told you who I am, did I?” She didn’t seem to have heard his question. His voice must have been too weak. The girl laid a hand on her chest. “I’m Celia Estrella Elizabeth von Grantz, Sixth Princess of the Grantzian Empire. I’ve just turned fifteen. Oh, but you can call me Liz for short. Most people do.” She concluded her introduction with a dignified smile.

Hiro stayed silent, thinking. Was he allowed to call a princess by her nickname? That sounded like it might really earn him an execution. He’d have to make an effort to address her more politely. He wasn’t about to lose his head to carelessness before he could even get his bearings.

“What’s wrong?” Liz asked.

“Am I actually allowed to call you that? Won’t they cut my head off?”

“It’ll be fine if I say it is. Dios is rude to me all the time, and he gets away with it.”

“I guess that’s true,” Hiro mused. “All right, then. Liz it is.”

She’d been open and friendly to him from the moment they first met. A princess she may be, but she seemed easy to get along with.

“Now that’s more like it. Although I should warn you, when I said ‘most people,’ I didn’t mean Dios...or the men in general.”

“Gaaaaaah!” Hiro cried. “I fell for it! I’m done for! I’m a dead man!”

Liz broke into a laughing fit as Hiro descended into panic. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” she said, wiping tears from her eyes. “It’ll be fine, honestly. Just...perhaps don’t call me Liz in public. I’m sure Dios won’t mind, but the soldiers might take it the wrong way.”

Being teased by someone at least a year his junior was not a pleasant feeling.

Liz clearly found it hilarious, but for Hiro, it was literally a matter of life and death. Still, a question remained. This girl had taken pains to be kind to him at every turn, even going so far as to insist he use her nickname. Why?

“Do you mind if I ask you something?” he ventured.

Liz looked up. “Not at all.”

“Why are you being so nice to me?”

“Because you were alive when I found you.”

“What?” Hiro cocked his head, uncertain what she meant. “Sorry, I don’t think I follow.”

“Hrmm...” Liz stared thoughtfully into space, cupping her chin in her dainty fingers. “I mean, Cerberus never attacked you, and the spirits didn’t seem to mind you either.”

“What would have happened if they had?” Hiro asked.

“Then you’d be dead, silly.” Liz shrugged. “The forest back there—the Anfang Forest, it’s called—it’s no normal place. A lot of spirits make their home there. The first emperor made a covenant with them a thousand years ago, allowing them to live in the forest as long as they acted as its guardians, and they keep it to this day. Only the royal bloodline can come and go as they please. Anyone else who enters will never make it out alive.”

Hiro blanched. “All that time, I had no idea...” No wonder the forest had seemed so treacherous to navigate. If he hadn’t chanced across Liz, he might have actually died in there. It sent chills down his spine to think how much worse things could have gone.

“So that’s why I helped you out,” she concluded. “Does that make sense?”

Hiro nodded. “I never even realized how much danger I was in. Why am I still alive, then? I’m no royal or anything, I’m just...me.”

“Well, there’s the mystery. That’s why Dios suspected you might be some sort of spirit.”

“That explains it. He did seem weirdly confident.”

“Exactly,” Liz agreed. “Anyway, I’ve told you what I can, so now it’s your turn. What *are* you doing here? You aren’t really a spirit, are you?”

Hiro gave a defeated sigh. “I wish I knew. Then maybe I wouldn’t be in this position.”

Liz leaned forward. “So you’ve lost your memory?”

“No, nothing like that. I’m just an ordinary high schooler. I’m not that interesting.”

“A ‘high schooler’? What’s that?”

Hiro’s eyebrows rose. “You know, like a student? A school student?”

“Do you mean like...at the Imperial Training Academy?”

She didn’t seem to know what he was talking about. Perhaps he shouldn’t be surprised. This world didn’t seem like the kind of place that had high schools. They might share his language, but that didn’t necessarily mean the terminology exclusive to Hiro’s more modern world would be understood.

“Wait. Hang on. That’s not it.” At last, Hiro realized that something was off. “I’m not speaking Japanese right now, am I?”

“‘Japanese’?” Liz cocked her head. “Is that a language? I’ve never heard of it.”

“All right, um...can I ask a weird question, then? What language *am* I speaking?”

She looked at him curiously. “Grantzian, of course.”

Hiro groaned. “What the hell is going on?”

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, I just...I don’t get it. Why do I suddenly know Grantzian?”

“How should I know? Anyway, tell me more about this ‘high schooler’ thing.” Liz leaned forward with curiosity, bringing her face within inches of Hiro’s nose. This was the second time she’d done it, and it was no less discomforting this time around. Hiro’s heart felt ready to jump out of his mouth.

“Hang on! Back up! Way too close!” he yelled in alarm.

“All right.” Liz pouted. “You don’t have to shout.” She withdrew, deflated.

A twinge of remorse passed through Hiro’s chest. He almost said sorry despite himself, but that might encourage her to do it a third time, and that would be bad for his heart. In the end, unable to apologize but still feeling guilty about pushing her away, he decided to set aside his mountain of worries for a moment and answer her question.

“What I meant to say was...I guess you’re right, in a way. That Imperial Training Academy you mentioned... A high school probably isn’t that much different.”

“Really?” Liz’s eyes sparkled with delight. She clasped her hands before her eyes like a maiden at prayer. “So that’s what you call it in the spirit world!”

“Well, I wouldn’t know,” Hiro gave an awkward smile. “I’m not a spirit, remember? I’m a human, just like you.”

“Are you sure? I know I said it before, but you do look strangely young. Your voice sounds very high-pitched for an adult too.”

“I’m only sixteen. That’s still a child in my world. Why do you think I’m one of these spirits, anyway? Do they look that much like me?”

“Not at all,” Liz said. “Spirits don’t have bodies or even voices, although the first emperor must have communicated with them somehow, I suppose.”

“Then what makes you so sure I’m one of them?”

Liz cocked her head again, putting a thoughtful finger to her chin. She had a way of making every gesture seem graceful. “I don’t really know. You give off that feeling, I suppose? That, and it would explain an awful lot.” She glanced outside the carriage window. “Anyway, we’ll be at the fort soon. I’m afraid things are a little hectic right now, but I’ll make sure we show you a proper welcome. Then you’ll finally be able to take it easy.”

Hiro followed her gaze. Beyond the glass, the sun sank below the horizon, dyeing the evening landscape with the warm hues of lingering embers.

* * *

Two days’ walk to the east of Cladius, imperial capital of the Grantzian

Empire, lay the outpost Fort Town. In the annals of history, it was written that the first emperor had prized this fort over any other in the land. Indeed, it was on this very spot that he had saved his crumbling nation from destruction and first set foot on his path of conquest. Such was Fort Town's historical and strategic significance that the honor of its command was only afforded to those with ties to the Grantzian royal family. This tradition continued with the present commander, one Sixth Princess Celia Estrella Elizabeth von Grantz.

That evening found Liz in the fort's war room, discussing strategy with her aides. She and two men stood around a long map table, poring over it as they spoke.

"The wagons are fully loaded, my lady," said one of them, a man with a great scar on his cheek—Platoon Commander Dios von Mikhail. "We may set out for Berg Fortress at a moment's notice. We need only decide when to depart."

"There's no guarantee of safe passage, however," added Battalion Commander Tris von Tarmier. Tris was a warrior past his prime, at the onset of old age, but his muscle-bound frame belied his years. He scratched the back of his head in consternation. "The whole empire knows of your reassignment, Your Highness. Any scoundrels with designs on your person may well fancy their chances."

"A hundred cavalry and two hundred foot soldiers will make for scant protection," Dios agreed.

Liz's face grew stony under his gaze. "They're all we'll have," she said. "Most of the garrison are First Legion. They aren't mine to take. Besides, we only need to survive the initial journey. We'll be safe in Berg Fortress—and once we're within the Gurinda border, we'll be under Uncle's protection. I have no doubt he'll welcome us with open arms."

Berg Fortress was located in the Gurinda Mark, a border province in the southwest of the empire. The region fell under the rule of Margrave Rugen Kiork von Gurinda, Liz's uncle.

"I'm more worried about what Lichtein is up to." Liz frowned. The Duchy of Lichtein, a nation of slavers, lay south of the Gurinda Mark, and the desert wolves had recently been spotted prowling the border. Any movement on their

part threatened to upset her plans.

“A needless concern, my lady. An attack from the duchy would be unthinkable,” Dios declared, trying to assuage her concerns. Not that his assertion was baseless; untold years in the empire’s shadow had done much to pacify Lichtein’s aggression. The duchy maintained amicable relations with the Gurinda Mark, and had for a long time; it had been decades since conflict last sparked along the border.

“Agreed,” said Tris. “It’s not the desert wolves who’d see you removed, Your Highness. If we find anyone lying in wait on the road, most likely it’ll be another of the imperial heirs.”

Indeed, it was these very heirs who had conspired to send Liz to Berg Fortress in the first place. By relegating her to a peaceful backwater territory, they had hoped to starve her of any chance to earn renown, effectively consigning her to obscurity.

“We can’t say that for certain,” Dios said. “The other royals would have little to gain from waylaying the eighth in line to the throne.” He avoided saying it outright out of politeness, but the truth hung heavy in the air: Liz had effectively been demoted.

“Eighth in line, aye,” said Tris, “and wielder of a Spiritblade. That’s what they fear.”

“They’re fools if they fear a hunk of metal,” Dios said with a scowl, but a glare from Liz stopped him short.

“Father would have your head for that,” she said. “If the Spirit King’s curse didn’t get you first.”

“Hmph! We can’t wage war jumping at spirits, my lady,” the man snorted, but though he tried to put on a show of indifference, there was no hiding the flash of terror in his eyes.

Tris let out a bark of laughter. “Best offer a prayer or two tonight, lad. Wouldn’t want to lose you.”

A thousand years ago, the first emperor had received a gift of power from the Spirit King, and from it he fashioned five legendary weapons: the Spiritblade

Sovereigns. Each Spiritblade was said to harbor a spirit's will and would only appear to those it acknowledged as its master. Should anybody attempt to manifest them by force, they would retaliate with a terrible curse, but to their rightful wielders, they conferred great power. For this reason, they were known as the regalo—or “gift”—of the Spirit King.

Of the five Spiritblades, only four now remained:

Lævateinn, the Flame Sovereign, a sword imbued with a spirit of fire.

Gáe Bolg, the Boreal Sovereign, a spear imbued with a spirit of ice.

Mjöltnir, the Thunder Sovereign, an axe imbued with a spirit of lightning.

Gandiva, the Gale Sovereign, a bow imbued with a spirit of wind.

The fifth Spiritblade was lost to time along with virtually all records of its existence. None could even say for certain what form it had taken. It was known only that, of all the Spiritblades, the second emperor held it in the highest esteem.

For his part, the first emperor was said to have loved Lævateinn the best. Indeed, for many long centuries after passing from his hand, the Flame Sovereign refused to acknowledge any of his successors as its wielder. Only now, after a thousand years, had it finally chosen a new master: the sixth princess, Celia Estrella Elizabeth von Grantz.

Lævateinn's favor had reversed Liz's fortunes overnight. Balking at the thought of wedding the wielder of a Spiritblade off to some foreign nation, the emperor had raised his daughter to the rank of major general and assigned her command of Fort Town. There she remained to this day under the jurisdiction of the First Legion. However, while her new role was no curse in and of itself, it attracted the attention of certain other invested parties: her fellow imperial heirs.

As the wielder of Lævateinn, Liz represented a threat that no one else in line to the throne could ignore. Her magnetism had grown by the day, even as the commonfolk whispered that she was the first emperor come again. Slowly but surely, she'd garnered support until First Prince Reinhardt Stovell von Grantz had decided she was too dangerous to be allowed to remain near the imperial

capital. Leveraging his position as commander of the First Legion, he had arranged for her to be reassigned to the border province of Gurinda.

Under any other circumstances, the other heirs would have tripped over themselves to decry the first prince's abuse of authority, but on this occasion they shared his concerns. Instead of turning against him, they had joined forces to pressure the nobility supporting Liz into silence. With no backers left to protect her, Liz had ended up assigned to an isolated outpost in perpetuity—and that was if she even reached her post alive. There was no telling whether Prince Stovell's supporters would attempt to ambush her on the road, and even if not, any of the other successors might try the same. Her task now was to overcome whatever perils lay in wait and arrive safely at Berg Fortress. The price of failure would be death.

Pushing back his hair, Dios gestured to the map laid out on the table. "There are two routes we might take to Berg Fortress, my lady. The first is the south road. This we can safely assume will be fraught with danger. Assassins, soldiers, highwaymen, bandits—whatever's waiting for us, we'll find it there." He shifted his finger. "The second leads east, over the Grausam Mountains. We cross Mount Himmel into Baum, then make our way back over the imperial border and into the Gurinda Mark."

"We can't climb Mount Himmel with cavalry," Liz objected.

"If we're caught on the south road, we'll be slaughtered to a man," said Dios. "Mount Himmel at least affords us a chance. A slim chance, granted, but we'll need all the slim chances we can get."

Tris placed two pawns on the map. "We'll split in two. We can't take all our men over Mount Himmel, it's true. Besides, we'll want to keep any prying eyes looking south. Dios, lad. Take the cavalry and fifty infantry and make for Berg Fortress by the road. The second you spot so much as an enemy helmet, abandon the wagons and ride hard for the Gurinda Mark. Is that agreeable to you, Your Highness?"

Liz looked far from convinced but, after a moment's thought, she gave a small nod.

With their plans settled, Dios breathed a sigh of relief. He turned to Tris. "And

where do you intend to be in all this?"

"I'll accompany Her Highness over the mountains," Tris said.

Dios grinned. "Careful not to overexert yourself, old man."

The old soldier snorted. "I'd beat a stripling like you to Baum any day the gods gave me."

"Are you sure? I'd swear your arms have been looking thinner recently," Liz chimed in.

"Your Highness?!" Tris spluttered. "Surely not!"

As Liz and Dios broke into laughter, for a moment, the war room no longer seemed so dark.

*

Hiro gazed at the stars through the window of his chamber in Fort Town. The sun had long since set, but still he stayed on his bed, watching the night sky. A freshly cleared plate lay on a table at his side, all that remained of a hearty dinner.

Liz had proved as good as her word: he had arrived not to an interrogation, but a guest's welcome. His hosts had ordered him not to leave his chambers and posted a sentry at his door, but Hiro didn't much care. They were welcome to be as suspicious as they wanted; he wasn't likely to go poking around when he could barely tell up from down in this world. Better to spend his time thinking up a way out of this mess...or so he'd hoped. In practice, with no good ideas presenting themselves, he had only succeeded in frittering away his evening.

Sleep was just beginning to beckon when his chamber door flew open, revealing Liz. "Sorry to bother you," she said as Hiro's eyes widened in surprise. "I'm sure you must want to rest." She approached, coming to a stop at his bedside. "There's been a sudden change of plans," she said, scratching her cheek apologetically.

"What's happened?" asked Hiro.

"We're moving to a new base of operations," she said. "Tonight. We plan to

leave before dawn.”

Hiro frowned. “So what does that mean?”

“I’ll have to hand control of the fort back to the First Legion,” Liz said, “which means you won’t be able to stay here anymore.”

“I...see.” So he was to be turned out and left to fend for himself in a foreign land. At night, no less. Hiro couldn’t imagine a more terrifying prospect. He wanted nothing more than some time to consider what to do next, but a glance at Liz’s face told him she was in a hurry. He likely didn’t have long to weigh his options. An idea came to him on a whim, and he decided to pursue it. It might be his best chance. “Would you mind if I came with you?” he asked.

“Eh?” Liz blinked in surprise.

Hiro gave an apologetic smile. “Is that a no, then?”

“It’ll be a hard journey,” Liz said. “You could even die if you aren’t careful. Are you all right with that?”

“I’m not going to last long anyway,” Hiro said. “Not if you turn me out in the middle of the night.”

“We wouldn’t send you away with nothing,” Liz protested. “We’re not monsters. We’d give you enough coin to make your way home, and I’m sure the kitchens could spare some food—”

“It’s fine.” Hiro cut her off. “I owe you for the meal, anyway. I know I’ll probably only get in your way, but...I want to join you, if you’ll have me.”

Liz regarded him curiously. “You’re a strange person, do you know that?”

Hiro chuckled. “You know, I get that a lot.”

Mostly from Fukutaro, he added silently.

Liz led Hiro down to the central courtyard, where great bonfires illuminated their surroundings with dancing flames. A full moon shone down through a gap in the clouds above, bathing the landscape in an austere silver glow. Ranks of soldiers stood at attention before the fort’s main gate. Their armor gleamed dully as it caught the moonlight.

Dios stood at the head of the column alongside another man in his midforties. The latter approached Liz, leading a horse by the reins.

“All’s ready, Your Highness,” the man said. “We leave at your command.”

“Good work. Shall we be off, then?” Liz took the reins and swung up onto her steed’s back with practiced grace. Out of nowhere, a thunderous cheer erupted from within the fort. Hiro swung around in alarm to find the garrison gathered in the courtyard, having come to see them off.

“Take care, Lady Celia Estrella!” cried one. “Long live Lady Celia Estrella!” shouted another. And others: “Glory to the Grantzian Empire!” “Spirit King’s blessings!” “Divines keep you!”

“Until we meet again!” Liz flashed them a smile as she waved back, prompting an even louder roar. Then she turned her horse about and cried, “Forward march!”

A horn blared, signaling their departure. The soldiers began to advance in lockstep. Hiro followed, taking care to stay close to Liz’s horse. As they passed through the gate, he heard her voice from somewhere above his head. “We’ll split off once we’re out of sight of the fort,” she whispered. “Stay close or you might get left behind.”

“Got it,” Hiro replied. “I won’t be far.”

For a while, they marched on in silence. No one talked. An unspoken apprehension hung in the night air, disturbed only by the clatter of armor. After some time, Hiro looked back to see the fort obscured by darkness.

“Now, Tris! Don’t you dare get us lost!” Liz cried, leaping down from her horse.

“Just try to keep up with these old bones, Your Highness!” Tris roared back as he sprinted ahead.

Liz grabbed hold of Hiro’s arm. “Time to run!” she hissed as she pulled him in her wake.

Behind their backs, half of the soldiers split off from the ranks, while the remainder continued marching as though nothing were amiss. Cerberus loped

easily alongside them, a white shadow in the darkness. Hiro tried his best to keep his footing as he stumbled after Liz, wishing vainly that he had a fraction of the wolf's agility.

On and on he ran, half-guided, half-dragged. Just as his legs were on the point of giving out, Liz's pace finally slowed to a walk. "Are you all right?" she asked, turning around and peering into his eyes. Sweat beaded on her forehead but, he noted with surprise, she wasn't even out of breath.

He smiled back weakly. "I'm... I'm just... Just fine..." he managed through gasps for air. If he didn't focus, he risked biting his tongue.

Liz smiled gently. "Well, tell me if you're having trouble," she said. "I'm sure we can afford a short rest."

"Not if he knows what's good for him, Your Highness," Tris's voice interrupted. "Coddle the boy and he'll grow up a milksop. You must push a man from the nest or he'll never learn to fly."

Hiro would have retorted if he could have, but his oxygen-starved lungs obliged him to swallow his pride as he focused on gulping down air. Cerberus ran merry circles in the grass nearby. Hiro could have sworn the wolf was mocking him.

"He's only a child, Tris," Liz said. "If I push him from the nest, I'll kill him."

"Hm?" Tris looked confused. "Dios said the whelp was sixteen. That's plenty old enough."

"He still *looks* like a child. We mustn't be mean to him," Liz insisted.

"He's got a boy's face, I'll grant you, but...sixteen, you say? Then again... Gah ha ha, a mystery indeed!" Tris gave a hearty laugh.

Hiro ignored him and looked back towards the road. A heaving mass of soldiers followed them. Though many were breathing heavily beneath their armor, none had fallen behind. *They're all in good shape*, Hiro thought, *although he's the most impressive of all*. He glanced back at Tris. Despite his age, the old soldier hadn't even broken a sweat.

"Did everyone make it?" Liz asked, concern in her voice.

“No laggards among my men, Your Highness,” Tris grinned. “I beat them into shape myself.” He didn’t even look back to check, Hiro saw. The firmness in his voice spoke of total confidence in his troops.

“Thank goodness.” Liz sighed with relief.

“All’s gone to plan so far, Your Highness. We’re well on course to reach the mountains by daybreak. With a bit of luck, the first our foes will know of our little bit of subterfuge will be our arrival in Berg Fortress.”

“Do you think Dios will be all right?” Liz asked.

“There’s not a doubt in my mind,” Tris said. “He’s a strong one, that lad.”

As Hiro listened to them talk, the sky began to pale, revealing a range of towering mountains on the horizon. Liz still clutched his hand, as she had all the way from the road, but he felt nowhere near as bashful about it now. Perhaps he’d grown used to the physical contact, or perhaps he was simply too exhausted to care.

As they reached the mountain road, Liz rounded on him in her now-familiar way. Hiro flushed red again as she pushed her face into his, but he said nothing and let her talk.

“Once we cross these mountains, we’ll be in Baum,” she said. “It’s a peaceful country. You’ll love it. There’s a beautiful city there, all filled with greenery.” Her voice turned apologetic. “It’s a shame we’re only passing through. I would have loved to show you the sights.” She turned to Tris. “My brother won’t be able to reach us in Baum, will he?”

“Would that I could reassure you, Your Highness,” the old soldier replied, “but there’s no way to be certain. For all we know, he’s seen through our plans from the first.” His brow knotted. “Besides, we’ve not told Baum of our coming. Best to make straight for the Gurinda border or we’ll risk causing unnecessary trouble.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Liz said with a frown, “although we’ll be hard to miss, with over a hundred men.”

“Baum won’t bother imperial troops if they’ve any wits about them,” Tris answered. “But we’ll be making ourselves no friends, it’s true.”

“I feel bad throwing our weight around like this,” Liz said.

Tris’s gaze softened. “We can write them an apology once we’re safe in the Gurinda Mark.”

“I suppose so. If we explain why we’re doing this, I’m sure they’ll understand,” Liz said. She lifted her eyes to look ahead. Hiro followed her gaze. A gently sloping path stretched up into the mountains before them, surrounded by verdant greenery. Liz had said the route would be perilous, but the tranquil sight was closer to a picnic spot than the sheer mountain trail he had envisioned. A small mammal of some kind scurried up the path as he watched.

Liz giggled. “You seem pleased,” she said.

Hiro nodded, smiling despite himself. “After what you said, I expected something much worse. It’s a nice place. I could see myself lying down for a nap here.”

“So could I,” said Liz. “Mount Himmel’s actually quite a gentle climb as the Grausam Mountains go. Don’t let that fool you into thinking it’s friendly, though. We’re still safe down here, but a lot of monsters make their home nearer the peak. That’s why merchants don’t come this way. It’s too dangerous.”

“Monsters?!” Hiro spluttered in alarm.

“Monsters,” Liz confirmed. “And the higher we climb, the more ferocious they’ll get. We’ll have to pass through their territory to get to the other side. That’s why I said this would be a hard journey.”

Hiro had only ever heard the word “monster” in games. Coming from this girl’s mouth, it sounded incredibly ominous. Her composure only lent it more of an impact.

“Don’t worry, I’ll protect you,” Liz assured him. “You just stay on the back lines, easy as you please.” Cerberus followed up with a bark of agreement. *You’re safe with me*, the wolf’s dauntless eyes seemed to say.

In spite of Hiro’s fears, the first leg of the journey passed without incident. After a while, Liz called out to Tris for a rest. The old soldier stroked his goatee and nodded. “A sound idea,” he agreed. “The going’ll only get harder. No harm

in recovering our strength while we can.”

“Wonderful!” Liz beamed. “All right, then. At ease, everyone!”

Her voice must have carried. All the way down the column, soldiers began to lay down their swords and shields. Hiro watched them idly as he settled down in the shadow of a nearby boulder.

This isn’t as bad as I expected, he mused. They were still only at the mountain’s foot, so perhaps he was getting ahead of himself, but his body was holding up remarkably well to the rigors of the climb. He’d similarly surprised himself during the run from Fort Towen—while he had ended up exhausted compared to Liz or Tris, he’d still managed to keep pace with trained soldiers. That was remarkable in and of itself, given that he hadn’t even done sports for three years.

Maybe that’s why it almost feels like I’m enjoying this, he thought. To his surprise, he found himself smiling.

Out of nowhere, a hand clapped him on the shoulder. Hiro looked up to find a soldier with graying hair staring down at him. “You’re doin’ well, lad,” the man said. “A damn good show for your years, I’d say. My money was on you runnin’ off back home inside an hour or two.”

“He still might, old man.” A younger soldier approached them, grinning. “It’s only uphill from here, in more ways than one.”

The older man gave an exaggerated shake of his head. “Give the boy his due, he’s still with us. That’s no mean feat, ‘specially at his age.”

The younger one relented. “At his age, aye. I’ll give him that.”

Hiro began to get the sense that they had made some incorrect assumptions. “Just so you know,” he said, “I’m sixteen.”

The older soldier laughed. “Aye, lad, and I was born yesterday.”

“It’s no good to mock your elders, boy,” the younger man agreed.

“He’s not joking,” a female voice chimed in.

The two soldiers watched, stunned, as Liz entered their group. The one with the graying hair was the first to work up the courage to speak. “Beggin’ your

pardon, Your Highness,” he said, “but...is that true?”

“Of course,” she replied with a smile. “Would I lie to my own men?”

The older man scratched his head awkwardly. “No, no, I weren’t sayin’ that. It’s only, hearing’s one thing, but to look at him...”

The younger soldier rubbed his chin. “Now that you mention it, I suppose he could pass for sixteen...in a certain light...”

The two peered closer at Hiro. As he squirmed under their gaze, he noticed Liz watching him from the sidelines, a smile playing on her lips. *That was an icebreaker*, he realized. It was only natural for the soldiers to be leery of this strange boy tagging along on their journey, but they could hardly vent their frustrations in Liz’s presence, leaving them and Hiro at an awkward distance. Liz must have interceded on his behalf to try and close that gap.

“All right, break’s over! Back on your feet, everyone!” Liz shouted for the company to hear. It didn’t escape Hiro’s attention that she had broken up their conversation just before it might have gotten awkward.

There was no telling when their next rest would come, but he had no doubt that it would see him and the soldiers grow friendlier still. Saying a silent thank you to Liz, he got to his feet.

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Sure enough, relations between Hiro and the soldiers gradually thawed as they approached the summit. The sun climbed steadily higher, and the mountainside grew steadily lighter. Before he knew it, five hours had passed, and if he craned his neck, he could make out the mountain’s peak in the distance.

Around that time, the company encountered the first monster blocking their path. Two bloodshot eyes bulged from the creature’s ugly, broad face, swiveling grotesquely as it sized them up. A patchy array of yellowed teeth protruded from a mouth like a ragged gash. Its neck was as thick as Hiro’s waist, and it sported a distended stomach as rounded as a balloon. Its overall frame was humanoid, but in the finer details it was a hideous parody of a man.

“What is *that*?” Hiro whispered in dismay.

Liz brought her mouth to his ear. "It's an ogul," she told him. "It's said they were human once, before the spirits cursed them to transform into monstrous creatures. After their neighbors chased them from their villages, they made their home in the mountains, where they remain to this day, lying in wait to attack and devour passing travelers."

Liz's calm explanation was welcome, but the warm tickle of her breath on his ear was more than a little distracting.

"For all their strength, though, they're not very smart," Liz continued. "This one shouldn't give us much trouble."

No sooner did she finish speaking than Cerberus bounded forward, growling. The wolf's razor-sharp claws gleamed in the sun as they traced a perfect arc through the ogul's neck. With a sickening *squelch*, the monster's head flew from its body. A fountain of blood sprayed from the severed stump, painting the earth a gruesome red. Hiro averted his eyes from the gory spectacle only to find himself face-to-face with an even more harrowing sight: the ogul's severed head rolling gently down the slope.

A smile blossomed on Liz's lips as she watched the battle conclude. "See?" she said. "No trouble at all."

"Yeah," Hiro said, more enthusiastically than he felt.

Farther up the trail, Tris was praising Cerberus. "Spectacular as always, my white-furred lady!" he cried. "I've never seen finer claw-work!" The wolf answered with a happy *ruff*, tail wagging furiously.

Liz looked back at Hiro over her shoulder. "That won't be the last, or the worst," she said. Her smile seemed almost threatening.

Hiro shrugged his shoulders and sighed as she walked away. "What could be worse than *that*?" he wondered.

Once more, he set off, only to realize the soles of his feet were throbbing. *I guess all this walking had to catch up with me eventually*, he thought. The verdant path from before had long since given way to a gravel trail strewn with large rocks. Pain blossomed underfoot with every step he took, but when he tried avoiding the larger rocks to spare his feet, he found the effort it took to

focus sapped his strength.

Something of his discomfort must have showed on his face, because soon enough he found Liz peering into his eyes again. “Are you all right?” she asked, evidently worried. “If it’s too hard to walk, I could carry you.”

“Thanks for offering,” he said, “but I can’t make a girl haul me up a mountain. My pride wouldn’t survive it.”

Hiro looked up at the mountain’s peak. It seemed close, but that appearance was deceptive, he knew. Still, the changing landscape made for concrete evidence of their progress, and with Liz insisting on taking breaks for his benefit, grumbling was out of the question. Most heartening of all were the soldiers, who had taken to encouraging him, approaching him with a “You’re tougher than you look!” or “Not long now!” whenever they stopped. With their camaraderie urging him on, the pleasures of the journey easily outweighed its downsides, and Hiro began to feel truly glad to have joined them. There was a sense of fulfillment to be found trudging up this mountainside that he had never experienced in his old life.

Liz turned to him with a grave look, interrupting his reverie. “We’re getting deeper into monster territory,” she said. “Whatever happens, make sure not to leave my side.”

“Does that mean we’ll run into more oguls?”

“Almost certainly,” she replied. “Whole packs of them, most likely.”

Hiro groaned. “For real?”

“For real,” she said, mirroring his phrasing.

At that moment, there came a rumble from up ahead. A huge volume of boulders tumbled down the trail towards them.

“Take cover behind the rocks!” Tris cried. The soldiers obeyed, darting to the safety of the rocks lining the path. Hiro made to follow their lead only to find himself yanked back into the open by Liz, who held his arm in a vice grip.

“Liz?!” he yelled in confusion. “What are you doing?! We need to move!”

She turned to him with confidence in her eyes. “Not you,” she said. “You’ll be

safer here with me.”

“Wha—?!” Hiro struggled to keep his balance as the ground shuddered underfoot. One of the boulders crashed into a nearby rock and burst apart, pelting them both with stony shards. The rest followed close behind, bearing down on them like falling meteors. A particularly large one barreled straight for Hiro. It was going to squash him flat. He was as good as dead. In terror, he squeezed his eyes shut.

Strangely, the crushing pain never came. When Hiro finally dared to open his eyes again, he saw the boulder lying in two molten pieces, split clean down the middle. “What the hell?” he breathed. His jaw hung slack in disbelief.

The other boulders were still coming. With a dull crunch, a second struck the half-melted remains of the first and bounced high into the air. Just as its shadow blotted out the sun, a raging inferno swallowed it and blasted it to pieces. Fragments of rock scattered around Hiro and Liz, leaving them unharmed.

“Hiro! Stay right there!” Liz shouted. Before Hiro could even think to respond, she was off, sprinting towards the rockslide.

The soldiers emerged from their hiding places behind the pair as if they hadn’t a care in the world. Cerberus trotted among them, yawning as she gazed skyward. Just as Hiro wondered why they seemed so unconcerned, a great *boom* echoed from farther up the mountain like a punch to his eardrums.

Hiro turned towards the explosion to find crimson hair dancing on the wind. In the middle of the trail, Liz stood against the boulders. She gestured with her arm and, one after the other, they inexplicably blew apart. The ensuing fragments melted in midair, producing a charred stench when they struck the ground. Wisps of white smoke rose from where they fell.

Once all the boulders were dealt with, Liz returned to Hiro triumphantly. She hadn’t even broken a sweat. “That should about do it!” she declared. “You aren’t hurt, are you?”

“I... Um, I mean, no, but...” Hiro struggled for words.

Suddenly a cry of “Oguls!” went up from one of the soldiers. The whole

company turned to look as one. A pack of the monsters leered down at them from higher up the slope—one larger specimen in the center surrounded by seven more. They were every bit as hideous as Hiro remembered.

“They’ve brought an ogre,” Liz whispered. Her voice sounded tense. “Dios would have been delighted.”

“An ogre?” Hiro whispered back.

Liz nodded, though she kept her eyes trained on the monsters. “Do you see the one in the center? Bigger and uglier than the rest? They’re a mutant variant of oguls, smarter and meaner. That’s why they form groups to attack in.”

“So then, that rockslide...” Hiro trailed off.

“Exactly,” Liz replied. “Their handiwork, I’m sure. They probably thought we looked like easy pickings.”

“So...is this bad?” Hiro asked hesitantly.

“This won’t be the first ogre we’ve slain. Not by a long shot. We’ll be fine as long as we’re careful.” Liz sounded confident. “Dios has actually killed so many, the men call him the Ogre himself. They joke that he must be the strongest one of all.”

“Huh...”

While they talked, the soldiers set about readying for battle. The heavy infantry drove their shields into the ground to form a wall in front of Hiro and Liz. Behind the front line, the archers nocked their arrows, drew back their bowstrings, and waited for the signal. Satisfied that their preparations were complete, Liz raised her arm high and swung it down.

“Fire!” she cried.

Countless bows twanged as one. In the blink of an eye, innumerable wooden shafts peppered the oguls’ hulking bodies. Four collapsed, killed where they stood. Seeing their comrades fall, two more flew into a rage and charged down the slope.

“Aim for their legs!” Liz ordered. The archers obeyed, sending arrows into the monsters’ thighs and knees. They stumbled, fell, and rolled, only coming to rest

when they crashed into the shield wall. An array of spears thrust between the shields soon put an end to them.

The final ogul decided to cut and run. It turned around and made to flee uphill.

“Cerberus!” Liz shouted. With a bark, the wolf leaped over the shield wall and bounded up the mountain. She caught up to the fleeing ogul and tore off its head before circling around to harry the ogre.

“Heavy infantry, clear the way! Light infantry, with me!” Liz commanded.

The soldiers raised a mighty roar in response. The shield wall retracted to the sides, opening a path for Liz to charge through. Tris and the light infantry followed close behind her.

“Don’t get careless!” she shouted. “Remember, ogres are smarter than oguls, and stronger too!”

The light infantry concentrated their attacks on the ogre’s legs before nimbly darting back as it tried to retaliate. The archers backed them up from the rear, but even with that added firepower, they struggled to bring the monster down. Countless arrows protruded from its hide, but still it raged. Wary of the creature’s formidable vigor, the soldiers found themselves fighting a delicate skirmish, constantly attacking and withdrawing.

It was a fragile balance—one a certain crimson-haired girl soon upended. “Stand back! I’ll finish it off!” cried Liz. Only then did Hiro realize that she brandished something in her hand.

One of the soldiers clapped him on the shoulder. “First time seein’ it, lad?” he asked.

“Seeing what?” Hiro asked, unable to look away.

“Her Spiritblade, of course,” the man said. “The Flame Sovereign, Lævateinn.”

Hiro’s heart thumped with a single forceful beat. He pressed a hand to his chest. “I... Yes,” he said hesitantly. “I think so.”

Liz danced around the ogre’s lumbering strikes. She clutched a flame-red sword in her hand, its blade wrought in crimson as beautiful and translucent as

a pigeon blood ruby, its hilt trimmed in gold that shone brilliantly in the sun. The ogre's face contorted in terror as a torrent of hellfire spewed from its tip.

Eager to avoid close combat, the monster picked up nearby boulders and hurled them at Liz as she approached. Most she sidestepped with easy grace, and the rest she immolated with Lævateinn's fire. Slowly but inexorably, she closed in on the ogre. As she entered striking range, a burst of searing wind tore down the trail, forcing Hiro to avert his eyes.

By the time he looked back, the ogre was screeching as a crimson blaze engulfed its corpulent body. It flung itself to the ground and rolled, trying to put itself out, but the flames only burned higher. When they finally went out, nothing remained of the monster but ash.

Liz broke into a full-faced smile as she saw that it was dead. "We did it!" she cried, waving back at Hiro. The sight of her returning, holding Lævateinn point-down by her side, held him transfixed. There was beauty enough there for any painting.

Again, his heart thumped. He clutched at his chest, gasping. "What's wrong with me? It's like...there's something..."

Something was raging within his chest, driving his heart to a fever pitch. Then, a pair of gorgeous, crimson eyes appeared at point-blank range, driving all such thoughts from his mind.

"Are you all right?" Liz asked.

"Wah!" Hiro yelped in shock.

He must have caught her by surprise too, because she gave an "Eek!" and her eyes went wide as saucers. "What's wrong?" she rounded on him. "You aren't hurt, are you?"

Hiro waved both hands in front of his face to ward her off. "S-Sorry! I'm great! Really! You, uh, you were super cool to watch, so..."

The compliment only seemed to encourage her. She thrust her face even closer, grabbing him by the shoulders to prevent his escape. "Really? I was that good?!"

“Well, yeah, I mean...you were awesome. It was beautiful, honestly.”

Liz scratched the back of her head in embarrassment. “Aww, stop it! You’ll make me blush! You can say it one more time, but that’s it!” She thumped him on the back several times for good measure.

“Hey, you two, time to get going,” a soldier called out as he passed.

“You. Boy. Carry my gear,” said another.

“Mine too.”

“And mine.”

“Thanks for volunteering.”

“Aye, whelp. Very kind.”

In the span of moments, the soldiers’ warmth had turned to cold disdain. Hiro watched in stunned silence as swords, spears, bows, and shields piled up before him. *Don’t their lives depend on these?* he thought. *I figured Tris, at least, would know better...*

The pettiness of it all made his head hurt. He looked up to find the blush of sunset beginning to color the sky. Liz had predicted they would make it to the summit by nightfall, but they must have taken longer than expected.

“This seems like a good place to make camp for the night,” Liz said.

Tris nodded. “Agreed. There’ll only be more monsters from here on out. We’ll find no better spot.”

“If we’re quick to pack away our gear, we can have the tents up by sundown,” Liz said. She turned to the soldiers and began to issue orders. The men sprang sharply into action.

Darkness had set in by the time they finished making camp. Behind Hiro’s back, smaller tents for the soldiers ringed a larger tent in the center reserved for the imperial princess. Bonfires stood at intervals around the encampment, intended to ward off wild beasts or provide light if any did approach. Squads of sentries, four heavies apiece, stood watch at cardinal points in case of monsters.

“Well, I made it. One day down,” Hiro said to himself with a sigh. His breath came out as fog in the night air. Above his head, a sky full of stars shone bright and clear. He watched them in silence for a while. Eventually, Liz came from the camp to join him, breathing into her hands as she approached.

“Aren’t you going to sleep?” she asked. “We’ve got an early start tomorrow. You’re not hungry or anything, are you?”

Hiro shook his head. “Nothing like that,” he said. “I’m just stargazing.”

There were other reasons he was avoiding going to bed, but they were better left unmentioned.

“Is that a hobby of yours?” Liz asked.

“Not particularly,” Hiro said. “I’ve just never seen the stars so close before. I figured I should take the chance.”

“Really...”

Liz drew close enough that their shoulders almost touched. To hide his discomfort, Hiro looked back up at the night sky. A canopy of stars stretched from horizon to horizon, glimmering with breathtaking radiance. They seemed almost close enough to reach out and grasp. Although the night was chill enough to turn Hiro’s breath white, beneath their gaze, he didn’t seem to feel the cold.

“My mother told me a story once, long ago.” Liz’s voice, clear as a bell, rang pleasantly in his ears. “When people die, they become spirits, and when they become spirits, their souls turn into stars. From up in the sky, they watch over the world forever at the Spirit King’s side. So whenever we’re feeling sad, or scared, or lonely, we only need to look up at the stars, and we’ll know we’re not alone.”

“That’s a nice story,” Hiro said.

“It’s just something we tell children at bedtime. Everyone in the empire knows it.” Liz gave a bashful giggle. She grasped Hiro’s hand, her smile white in the darkness. “Come on, let’s head back to the tent. You’ll catch a cold out here.”

Hiro pulled away before he even had time to blush. “Not right now!” he protested. “I’m fine! I’ll just stay out here!”

“What’s wrong?” Liz asked.

“What do you mean, ‘what’s wrong’? I’m a guy and you’re a girl! We can’t share a tent!”

That was the reason Hiro was outside in the first place. No sooner had they finished setting up the tents than Liz had issued the chilling decree that he would sleep in hers. After racking his brains for a means of avoiding that fate, he had settled on killing time outside the camp until she fell asleep, but now that plan was in ruins.

“It won’t just be us,” Liz said with a pout. “Cerberus will be there.”

“Yeah, but...” Hiro glanced through the open tent flap. Cerberus lay curled up inside, already sound asleep.

“Stop being silly and get in!” Liz planted her hands on his back and shoved him forward. He tried to resist, but it wasn’t enough.

A lantern hung from the roof of the tent, with a lit candle held within. The tent was small enough that its light was sufficient, but it filled the interior with a seductive glow that set Hiro’s heart racing. Thick blankets lay on the ground to protect them from the rocky ground below. Cerberus had taken up position in the center of the tent, but something resembling a duvet had been set up to the wolf’s left.

“If only there was somewhere to bathe up here,” Liz said ruefully. “Sorry if I stink.”

Hiro blanched. “I told you, we can’t share a bed. It’s not happening.”

“Really? Am I that bad?” Liz’s shapely nose twitched as she sniffed herself. *I’m the sweaty one if anything*, Hiro thought, but as he debated over whether to actually say it, Liz gave up and flashed him a carefree smile. “It’s so hard to tell with yourself, isn’t it?” she said. “Guess that means it’s not worth worrying about. Come on, get in!”

“Look, that’s not...” Hiro stammered. “I really can’t...”

“That’s enough stalling from you, mister! We’ve got an early start tomorrow!”

“Bwah?!” A fierce impact struck Hiro in the back, knocking the air from his lungs. The world went black for an instant. When he came to, he found himself lying prone. Liz’s head lay so close that he could see it even out of the corner of his eye—although he hardly needed to look, when he could feel her body warmth all the way down his side.

“Cerberus doesn’t let me cuddle her at bedtime,” she murmured sheepishly.

That doesn’t mean you can use me as a replacement, he thought sourly.

Liz yawned. “I’m going to sleep wonderfully tonight. I just know it.”

With his heart going like the clappers, Hiro felt it would be a miracle if he slept at all. Liz’s breathing turned deep and regular. She had already drifted off.

“That was quick,” Hiro muttered.

He had hoped a herd of sheep might show up, but all that appeared before him were demons. They would have been bad enough by themselves, but even darker thoughts assailed him if he dared look to the side.

Doing battle with his own monsters, Hiro sank into darkness.

*

Far from where Hiro and Liz were sleeping beneath the stars, a hundred sel (three hundred kilometers) southeast of the imperial capital of Cladius, lay a village named Segen. Close enough to the second imperial city to be shielded from monsters and bandits, it was typically a quiet place. On this night, however, tension hung thick in the air.

Tents of various sizes ringed the village. Heavily armored soldiers watched the perimeter and patrolled the streets. The townsfolk huddled in their houses, afraid of provoking their occupiers. The military presence extended even to the mayor’s manor, where several dozen sentries stood guard. A flag fluttered lazily before the entrance, adorned with a sword and shield on a violet field.

The manor’s front door opened into a well-kept hallway, which turned into a parlor on the left-hand side. A dainty girl and a dashing young man sat within.

“I fail to see how this diversion profits us, my lady,” the young man said. His

name was Viscount Laurence Alfred von Spitz, and he revered the young girl he was addressing—his commander—as a goddess.

The girl answered him only with silence. With her silver hair and leaden gray eyes, she might have seemed cold as ice, but her doe eyes and long bangs—carefully clipped level with her eyebrows—gave her the endearing look of a small animal. “Delicate” perhaps described her best, with her small stature and frail limbs. It was something of a marvel that she still looked so childlike at seventeen years of age—*although her heaven-sent visage would rival that of any Grantzian princess*, von Spitz privately preened.

Her name was Treya Verdan Aura von Bunadala, and her record of service was as remarkable as her appearance. After graduating at the top of her year from the Imperial Training Academy, she had become the youngest ever assistant to the commander of the Third Legion. There she served still, albeit now as its chief strategist. Her appointment to the position dated back two years to Third Prince Brutahl’s match into Faerzen...

While the western nation had sparred with the empire for years, hostilities had always been limited to small-scale border clashes until the third prince took it upon himself to launch a full-scale invasion in the hopes of winning glory. He won infamy instead. Running into fierce resistance, he suffered heavy losses and eventually lost the confidence of the emperor. Faced with political ruin, he gathered his advisors together and delivered them an ultimatum. “If any among you believe you can bring me victory, step forward. Speak foolishly and I will cut off your head.”

None of his advisors dared respond. The prince grew increasingly angry with their reticence, but just as his rage was about to reach its peak, someone stepped forward.

“I can win this war, Your Highness,” she said.

The speaker was the most junior of Prince Brutahl’s advisors, a young girl he had brought on primarily as a novelty. Impressed by her courage, he named her his chief strategist. As for the advisors who had failed to step forward, in his disappointment, he set aside the children of influential nobles and put the rest to the sword.

No sooner did the girl step into her new role than she demonstrated a singularly brilliant tactical mind. Territory after territory fell to the empire as her subtle and ingenious ploys succeeded to devastating effect. Meanwhile, their enemy, losing men hand over fist to their string of defeats, fell into sharp decline. Once it became clear that continuing the conflict would only lead to national collapse, Faerzen called for a ceasefire and began to sue for peace.

Upon the girl who won his war, Third Prince Brutahl bestowed the epithet of Athena, the Warmaiden—a name chosen to evoke the second emperor's title of Mars, the War God. That same Warmaiden now sat in a certain parlor in Segen, thoroughly engrossed in a book.



Von Spitz's question still hung in the air, but except for the dry rustle of turning pages, she made no sound. Perhaps she was ignoring him. Perhaps she hadn't even heard. Undeterred, he tried again.

"Lady Aura," he said, "while I am loath to interrupt your reading, we have urgent matters to discuss."

It was Aura's habit to spend her every spare moment with her nose in a book. One book in particular, in fact: a chronicle of the life and times of the second emperor. She likely had a more complete knowledge of the War God than anybody else in the empire.

"Lady Aura," von Spitz said, "please lend me your ear."

Finally, he seemed to get through. Aura closed her book and turned her large, round eyes towards him. Overcome with affection, he fell to his knees and prostrated himself on the floor.

"It goes without saying," she said, "that I have the utmost respect for His Majesty, the First Emperor."

Von Spitz sighed. *Here she goes again*, he groaned internally. Every time she emerged from her ancient myths, she always said the same thing.

"Emperor Artheus's feats of conquest are beyond dispute," Aura continued, "but we must ask who it was who laid the first stone. It was the second emperor, Emperor Schwartz, who saved his crumbling kingdom; Emperor Schwartz who won his first victory; Emperor Schwartz who subjugated his immediate neighbors. Were it not for him, the Grantzian Empire as we know it would not exist."

"As you say, my lady," von Spitz replied flatly.

While Aura's face remained as sullen as ever, her speech grew more impassioned. "Emperor Schwartz was over seventy years old when his elder brother passed on. He took the throne in the twilight of his life and passed away within the year. Imagine what he might have accomplished had he been the first emperor rather than the second. He could have conquered the world."

Von Spitz's face fell to hear her speak so fervently. The events she was

describing had occurred a thousand years ago, the two men she spoke of long since enshrined as deities in the Grantzian pantheon of the Twelve Divines. While the Grantzian Empire itself was ironclad proof of their existence, history had a way of exaggerating the particulars. Many of Emperor Schwartz's supposed feats—slaying ten thousand men single-handedly during his final battle, for example, or leveling an entire town with a swing of his sword—were clearly the province of fiction. Spiritblades might be powerful, but their wielders were still only human. In reality, von Spitz doubted that Schwartz could have slain more than a thousand men before collapsing from exhaustion, although that would still have been impressive in and of itself.

In any case, all that was beside the point. He needed Aura to focus on the task at hand. "How long are we to remain in this village?" he asked.

"I wasn't finished." Aura sounded peeved.

"A letter has arrived from Prince Brutahl."

Aura grimaced upon hearing the prince's name, as von Spitz knew she would, but she begrudgingly allowed him her full attention. "What does it say?" she asked.

"I wouldn't know," von Spitz replied. "I haven't read it."

"Why not?"

Von Spitz took a deep breath. "My lady, I would never presume to break a royal seal."

"I've only just finished reading Emperor Schwartz's legend. I want to bask in it for a while. You read. I'll listen."

"Of course, my lady." Von Spitz produced an ostentatious envelope, from which he pulled a single leaf of paper. It read as follows:

To my most beloved Warmaiden,

Ten days have passed since you rode forth, yet I note with great surprise that I have yet to receive word of your success. If your target's royal blood has chanced to stay your hand, I implore you, set aside your reservations. It is my

wish that you deliver this pernicious upstart the death she deserves.

While I would never suggest that you are unequal to this task, should you feel your resources are inadequate, I will dispatch as many men as you require. You need only ask.

May the Twelve Divines keep you.

Signed,

Third Prince Brutahl of the Grantzian Empire

Von Spitz finished reading. "That's all, my lady."

Aura scowled. "Idiocy."

Von Spitz gave an awkward smile. "His Highness fears for his position, my lady. Third in line he may be, but should anything happen to the first prince, the sixth princess's Spiritblade may very well see her seated on the throne."

"The twenty-eighth and thirty-sixth emperors couldn't even wield a sword. Emperors are chosen for their fitness to rule, not for the weapons in their hands."

"Would that His Highness understood that, my lady," said von Spitz.

"Maybe then he wouldn't risk angering the emperor with this ridiculous plan. He's dancing along a cliff edge and he doesn't even see it."

"His Highness is not renowned for his foresight," von Spitz agreed.

"Burn that," Aura said. "I don't want to look at it."

"At once, my lady." Von Spitz tossed the letter into the nearby fireplace, then produced a slip of red paper and threw that in as well. A small column of flame flared in the grate. By the time it subsided, only ashes remained. Von Spitz looked back at Aura to find her frowning.

"That was a waste of a spirit seal," she said.

"I could not allow the slightest scrap to remain," von Spitz replied. "Should someone learn that you had burned a royal letter, there is no telling what might happen. I will not risk endangering your person."

Aura's brow furrowed. "Fine. I'll write to Frieden for more. At Prince Brutahl's expense, of course. Will twenty do?"

"You needn't trouble yourself, my lady," von Spitz said. "One spirit seal is no great loss."

His statement was not entirely accurate. One spirit seal commanded a price of three golden grantzes. A typical commoner in the Grantzian Empire could expect to earn three silver dratzes for a day's labor, so with ten silver gratzes to the grantz, and ten silver dratzes to the gratz, three grantzes represented a sum most citizens could never afford. Nonetheless, Frieden—the Spirit King's sanctum—saw an endless stream of visitors both rich and poor in search of spirit seals to cure one disease or another.

For all that, the likelihood that a commoner could ever purchase a spirit seal was low. Frieden only produced between eighty and one hundred per day, the vast majority of which were snapped up by the royal family or the great houses. What few did make their way to the public marketplace were often hiked up to twice their original price.

"Besides," von Spitz continued, "we have enough seals in reserve to last us through this mission."

On account of their rarity and cost, spirit seals were most commonly saved for use in battle against wielders of spirit weapons. Nobody in the land wasted them on burning letters. Even a royal would risk financial ruin with such extravagance, and House Spitz, although hardly impoverished, was by no means wealthy. To Laurence Alfred von Spitz, however, one spirit seal was a small price to pay to keep his beloved mistress safe. *For you, I'd gladly lead my house to ruin*, he thought.

Aura gave an exasperated sigh, but then her face turned serious. "This isn't a pleasure trip," she said. "We're here because this village is only a stone's throw from the Gurinda Mark."

Indeed, the Gurinda border lay only a few dozen sel to the south of Segen.

"Do you mean to attack, my lady?" von Spitz asked.

"No. Too rash. Besides, we don't have any justification for it. Both our heads

would roll.”

Von Spitz frowned. “Then why are we here?”

“To speak with the sixth princess.”

“I can’t imagine Her Highness will simply accede to our demands.”

“Then we’ll turn around and go home,” said Aura.

Von Spitz knew she meant it. If the sixth princess turned her away, she would return to Prince Brutahl...where she would have to answer for her failure. “His Highness wishes the sixth princess dead, my lady,” he reminded her.

“And what do you think would happen if he got his wish?” Aura asked.

Von Spitz thought for a moment. “His Imperial Majesty would be furious,” he said. “Prince Brutahl may even lose his head.”

“Lævateinn wielders are few and far between,” Aura agreed. “The emperor would punish his son harshly for his indiscretion.”

“Regardless, if we were to disobey a prince’s direct order, our lives would be forfeit.”

“That’s why we need to buy time until the emperor returns. Then Prince Brutahl will have to give up on this nonsense.”

The imperial throne in Cladius currently sat unoccupied. Following the breakdown of the armistice with Faerzen, the emperor had taken the first prince and led a second invasion over the western border. Prince Brutahl’s opportunity to dispose of his younger sister would only last as long as his father’s absence. Once the emperor returned, Brutahl would be forced to concede defeat, but his anger at his failure would undoubtedly fall on Aura’s head. *I must avoid that at all costs*, von Spitz thought to himself, even as he pretended to agree with his mistress.

“I see,” he said. “How should we proceed, then?”

“First, write a letter to Margrave von Gurinda,” Aura said. “Don’t worry about the details. They don’t really matter.” With that, she lowered her eyes and returned to the world of her book.

Von Spitz left the parlor, leaned back against the door, and heaved a sigh.

“So it falls to me, then,” he murmured. Aura could be fiercely stubborn when the mood took her. Once she got like this, she wouldn’t change her mind, no matter what. He bowed his head to the closed door and made his way out of the manor.

Chapter 2: Portent

No time feels so long as one's waking hours, nor so short as slumber.

Lying on the ground, swaddled so completely in blankets that only his head protruded, was a sleeping boy: Hiro Oguro.

"Look how soundly he's sleeping, Cerberus."

Ruff!

"It's almost a shame to wake him."

Ruff!

The voices filtered down to Hiro's sleeping consciousness, lifting him from darkness despite his heavy eyelids. Unwilling to leave the warm bliss of his cradle, he pulled the blankets over his head. For a moment, all was well, until—

"Gwaaaaaah!"

A mighty impact slammed into Hiro's abdomen. The shock resonated throughout his entire body. His eyes practically bulged out of their sockets.

"Hmm," said the female voice. "That's not quite the reaction I expected."

His stomach felt like it was on fire, but he couldn't even move to ease the pain. All he could do was gulp desperately for air like a beached fish.

Tinkling laughter descended from above. "Aha ha! Oh, Hiro, your face! I can't... It's too early for this!"

Hiro looked up with tears in his eyes to see Liz clutching her stomach in laughter. "It's too early for *that*!" he cried. "What do you think you're doing?!"

Liz sat straddling him, over the exact spot that ached so badly. There was no doubt she was the culprit. Indeed, when he asked why she'd resorted to violence, she admitted as much. "I had to wake you up somehow," she said sheepishly.

"And you couldn't have picked a gentler—?" Hiro froze midsentence. Behind

Liz's shoulder, framed by the tent's entrance, was an ogre.

"You'd better have a good explanation for this, whelp," it said, stepping forward to reveal itself as Tris.

Hiro suddenly felt very conscious of the muscular old soldier's bearish bulk. "It's not what it looks like!" he protested. Granted, the situation looked incriminating from the outside, but there was a perfectly innocent explanation...if Tris was willing to listen.

Liz stared at him blankly. "What's not what it looks like?"

"I'm begging you, stop talking before you make things worse!" Hiro hissed. His life might actually depend on it.

Tris advanced with thunderous footsteps. "A wolf in sheep's clothing all this time, eh?" he said. "Step aside, Your Highness. I'll rid us of this reprobate." His sword gleamed dully as he drew it from its sheath.

Liz cocked her head, entirely blind to the tension in the room. "I'm not sure what you two are playing at, but are we ready to leave?" she asked.

Tris hesitated. "We are, Your Highness."

"Then let's have breakfast and go. We have a long day ahead of us." The weight lifted from Hiro's stomach. "We'll be having bread and soup. Is that all right with you, Hiro?"

Hiro blinked. "I, um... Yeah, I think so."

"Perfect! Breakfast then Baum it is!" Liz beamed. "Don't just stand there, Tris, you're making the tent look untidy. Go and eat something!"

"But, Your Highness, I..." Tris's shoulders slumped. "Count yourself lucky, whelp." He left the tent, the wind taken out of his sails.

Hiro breathed a sigh of relief. Liz brought him breakfast and he tucked in with relish. Between mouthfuls of slightly hard bread, he tried a spoonful of soup. It was well seasoned with chunks of chicken mixed into the broth. Cerberus sat in front of him, gazing hopefully up at his food. Off to the side, Liz was taking off her clothes.

"Wait, wha—?!" Hiro spat out his breakfast in alarm. Cerberus received an

unexpected faceful of soup, but apologizing would have to wait. “What do you think you’re doing?!” Hiro spluttered between coughs.

“Getting changed, of course,” Liz replied. “What does it look like?”

“No, I mean, *why* are you getting changed?!”

“If I can’t take a bath, I’d at least like to put on new underwear.”

“I guess, but, I mean...I’m right here!” Hiro protested.

“What’s wrong with that?” Liz looked thoroughly confused. Between this and her behavior last night, it was clear she had never learned to keep her guard up around men. Well, that or she felt no shame in exposing herself. Either way, Hiro wanted a word with whoever raised her.

“Look,” he began, “I’m a guy—”

“Sorry, but can this wait? I won’t be long.” Again Liz took hold of her shirt.

Hiro flew into a panic. “No, stop! Wait! Just...please, I’m begging you!”

“What’s gotten into you all of a sudden?” Liz was starting to look annoyed.

“I’ll look the other way, all right?” he said. “You tell me when you’re done.”

“All right, but why?”

“It’s not important. Don’t think too hard about it. All right, I’ll turn around now. Wait until I’m looking away, okay?”

“I still don’t get it, but fine.”

Hiro turned his back. The rustling of underwear filled the tent. He waited in silence as time dragged on. Each torturous second felt like an eternity.

“Right, I’m done,” Liz announced.

Hiro let out a breath he didn’t even realize he’d been holding. Sweat broke out on his forehead as exhaustion overcame him. He felt like he’d just run a marathon. In front of him, Liz began making a start on her breakfast, entirely oblivious to his distress.

“Guess I’d better finish too,” Hiro said to himself. He looked down at his bowl, but it was empty. *Where on earth is my soup?*

“I think Cerberus got yours,” said Liz.

Hiro glanced around for the culprit just in time to spot a joyfully wagging tail disappearing through the tent flap. “Looks like it,” he sighed, defeated. “That was one happy tail.”

He looked up to find a silver spoon hovering in front of his face. “Say ‘aah,’” said Liz. He really must have made for a pitiful sight.

“Come on, I’m not a kid,” he protested...but his stomach chose that very moment to betray him.

After a thoroughly undignified breakfast, Hiro stepped out of the tent and into the morning sun. He spread his arms wide and let the crisp mountain air fill his lungs. Looking around, he found that the soldiers had already neatly packed away their tents. The only one left was his own, which Liz had already started to take down. Seeing her set to work, several soldiers ran to help. Tris was among them. Hiro pitched in too. Soon enough the tent was packed up and they were ready to depart for Baum. They would descend Mount Himmel and head south, tracing the foot of the mountain range. Liz claimed it would take them sixteen days to reach the Gurinda Mark on foot. Hiro had been prepared for a long journey, but he hadn’t expected it to be quite that long. Even so, he had no regrets. His joints might ache, but that was only pain. He could easily grit his teeth and bear it.

The company was around halfway down the mountain when it encountered a new variety of monster: neither an ogul nor an ogre, but something far larger.

“It’s enormous,” Hiro breathed. The creature must have been three times his height, with the blue-gray face of a corpse and a muscular body clad in rusty armor. Its upper body was indistinguishable from a man’s, but its lower body tapered into a writhing, snakelike tail. Its bloodshot eyes gazed at him with slitted, reptilian pupils. It roared, and the ferocity in its voice was so overpowering that he couldn’t help but shrink away.

“It’s a gigas,” said Liz. “A former spirit that was exiled to Aletia for turning against the Spirit King, or so the legends say.”

“Is it as strong as it looks?” Hiro asked.

“As strong as you’d expect from a fallen spirit. They’re smarter than ogres too — Ah!”

The gigas surged forward with astonishing speed, cutting off Liz’s explanation. Hiro’s eyes widened as its enormous tail slammed down in the spot she had been standing. The impact shattered the ground, sending a plume of dust and rock into the air. Hiro’s throat clenched as his brain tried to catch up. It had all happened too quickly to process.

“Hiro, stay right there!” Liz’s voice commanded. She burst from the dust cloud unharmed and clutching Lævateinn. Hiro only had a moment to breathe a sigh of relief before she charged past him towards the gigas.

“Light infantry, follow Her Highness!” Tris barked. “Archers, cover them! Heavies, form up while the others keep it busy!”

As ordered, the light infantry charged forward to attack the gigas while the heavy infantry set up a two-tiered shield wall. The archers took position behind them, drawing their bowstrings to their chins as they aimed at their target.

“Ready the javelins! I’ll get its attention!” Liz shouted to the light infantry. She brandished Lævateinn at the gigas, conjuring a burst of flame from its tip. It flared before the monster’s eyes, forcing it to flinch back for a few precious moments.

“Now! Throw!” she cried. The soldiers hurled their javelins at the gigas. A moment later, Tris’s voice echoed from the back lines. “Loose!”

A fan-shaped cloud of arrows whistled through the air, instantly turning the gigas into a pincushion. The monster screeched in pain. It began to lash about with its tail, cracking the earth in its fury.

Liz’s eyes widened in alarm. “Fall back!” she shouted, but too late; the gigas’s tail crashed down on the soldiers. Most dove out of the way, but cries of shock and pain rose into the air as several stragglers vanished in a cloud of dust.

“Retreat! I’ll hold it off!” she commanded. She swung at the gigas with Lævateinn, but it tilted its body to smartly avoid the attack. From there, it seized the offensive. Wind swirled around its colossal fists as it unleashed a devastating barrage of punches, but as fast as its blows were, Liz saw through

them all. She dodged every last attack and, with a fierce battle cry, swung her crimson blade in an upward arc. One of the gigas's arms sailed through the air, spraying blood from its severed stump. Flames consumed the detached arm before it even hit the ground.

The pain drove the gigas into a frenzy. It thrashed about, sending the encircling soldiers flying. They tumbled uncontrollably down the slope as though caught in a landslide. With every passing second, it seemed more certain that the monster would slaughter them all. Hiro's face took on the pallor of despair as he watched aghast.

And his legs moved unbidden.

What am I...?

In the same instant he found himself taking a step forward, agony lanced through his eye.

What the hell's going on?

He cried out in pain and pressed his hands to his face. Knowledge poured into his mind in a vast flood, enough to drive him mad. His heart pulsed with a single forceful beat.

Slaughter your foe, some unknown force seemed to whisper in his ear. *You have the power*. From the deepest recesses of his soul rose an unaccountable will to fight.

"Stand up straight, whelp, or you'll end up squashed flat!" a gruff voice called out. Tris had arrived with the heavy infantry, who were busy forming up on the front line. "Make haste, you layabouts!" he yelled at his men. "You're the best chance we've got!"

The heavy infantry planted their shields into the ground, forming an impromptu wall of iron.

"Your Highness! To me!" Tris cried.

"Coming!" Liz shouted back, retreating behind the shield wall.

"Brace yourselves, men!" Tris bellowed. "Plant your feet firm! I'll not see my heavies knocked on their arses like a pack of schoolboys! Archers, cover the

light infantry!”

The archers obliged, sending out a volley of arrows to shield the vanguard’s retreat. The gigas weathered the rain of pinpricks and came after them, its face twisted with dreadful fury, but its tail only crashed against the shield wall.

“Take the wounded to the rear!” Liz commanded. Free hands carried the injured soldiers away from the fighting.

The shield wall rocked dangerously under the gigas’s assault. “We can’t hold!” one of the heavies cried. Their shields were beginning to deform under the creature’s monstrous blows. It was only a matter of time before their line broke.

“If it keeps on pummeling us, we’re done for!” Tris shouted, a note of urgency creeping into his voice.

Liz nodded. She peered at the gigas through a gap in the shield wall. “I’ll draw its attention,” she said. “You cut off its tail while I’ve got it distracted.”

Tris looked incredulous. “Nonsense, Your Highness! It would be wiser to attack with the heavies and create an opening!”

“Half of them would die!” Liz shot back. “It’s safer if I do it!”

“I’ll not see you risk your life, Your Highness. Only as a last resort—” Tris’s words froze in his throat. Liz, too, gasped in shock. They both saw it: part of the shield wall had faltered. The gigas saw its chance and drove its mighty fist into the gap. Men flew through the air, armor and all. The monster bellowed in triumph and plucked one of the fallen soldiers from the ground.

“Tris! Back me up!” Liz yelled. Before the words had even left her mouth, she was running. Tris shouted for her to stop, but she paid him no mind. Her eyes were focused on one thing alone: the gigas’s wrist. “Give me back my soldier!” she cried, leaping high into the air with *Lævateinn* at the ready.

Her slash never struck home. The gigas’s tail whipped round from outside her field of view to swat her out of the sky. By the time she saw the blow coming, it was too late. The tail smashed into her ribs, sending her spinning away.

Unable to break her fall, Liz crashed down hard onto the stony ground and

rolled to a stop. She immediately tried to get up, but her knees buckled beneath her. She gritted her teeth in frustration as her own body failed her.

With a grunt of exertion, she planted her sword in the earth and hauled herself to her feet, grimacing as pain blossomed in her skull. She pressed a hand to her forehead. Sticky scarlet trickled down her face from a parting in her beautiful red hair. She must have hit her head upon striking the ground, but the sight of her own blood was far from enough to break her fiery will. Her crimson eyes blazed with resolve.

“Come on, get up!” she said to herself. If anyone was to beat the gigas, it was her with Lævateinn...but as she stared down her foe, something moved to block her view.

“Hiro?”

It was him. The boy whose face seemed so gentle, yet whose eyes harbored such fierce determination. The hardships of the road surely weighed heavy on his body, the terror of facing monster after monster surely weighed heavy on his mind, and yet he had endured without a word of complaint. Now, shielding her from harm, he seemed to stand as tall as any giant.

*

“Hiro?” asked a confused voice from behind him. “What are you doing?”

Hiro gave a self-deprecating smile. Even he didn’t know.

He took one step forward, then another. His eyes were filled with uncertainty, but his feet were sure. A girl lay injured in front of him. That alone was reason enough to fight.

You’re safe now. I won’t let them hurt you anymore.

Some might call that shallow, but let them sneer. The simplest reasons were the best. When he had first emerged into this world, scared and confused, this girl had helped him purely out of the goodness of her heart. Now she was lying bruised and battered on the ground. No man could fail to leap to her defense.

That thought quelled the last of his doubts. His lips curled into a faint smile.

“Hiro, you can’t! You’ll die!”

Liz cried out a warning from behind him, but he ignored it. Dust flew as he launched himself straight at the gigas. “It’s me you’re fighting now.”

The gigas noticed his approach and swung its tail around, seemingly to strike him, but the tail merely whooshed past the tip of Hiro’s nose to slam into the ground instead, the impact shattering the earth and sending a thousand razor-sharp blades of stone flying towards him.

“Nice try, but I saw that coming.”

Hiro dodged every last shard with chilling ease. Though the slightest misstep would have spelled a grisly end, effortless movements of his head, legs, hands, and shoulders carried him untouched through the deadly shrapnel.

“Liz!” he called over his shoulder. “I’ll keep it distracted! You finish it off!”

He picked up a javelin one of the soldiers had dropped during their retreat. The gigas tossed aside the man in its grasp and peered at Hiro with reptilian eyes, intrigued by this new prey. Liz had been watching, dumbfounded, but seeing the monster’s attention focus on him, her eyes widened in horror.

“Get back! You can’t fight it!” she shouted. Her voice turned into a scream halfway through. No doubt she was imagining the gruesome fate that might await him. That spectacle was confined to her imagination for now, but it could very soon become reality.

The gigas lunged at Hiro with its remaining arm. Its tail, too, lashed out to join the fray. The monster was more agile than it looked; its barrage left no room for counterattack. Any one of its blows would reduce a human body to pulp, an unarmored one all the more so—but not a single one struck home.

“How?” Liz whispered as she looked on in disbelief. “That’s not possible...”

With Hiro occupying the gigas’s attention, Tris and the rest of the soldiers found enough room to rally. The old soldier’s jaw hung slack as he watched their battle. “I don’t believe it,” he whispered. “Is the boy even mortal?”

For three years, Hiro had struggled with recurring side effects from his accident. He had perceived others as moving so slowly, they seemed frozen in place. An ascended state of mind, a martial artist might have called it. A kind of

mastery attainable only with a lifetime of training, and even then only by a select few. The ability to see the flow of an opponent's breath in a handful of exhaled air particles, and so divine their intent.

Reluctant to worry his family, Hiro kept his condition to himself. His doctor wouldn't have known what to make of it anyway.

But the people of Aletia knew.

For its name was the stuff of legends.

"Uranos..." Liz's voice trailed away into nothingness.

"Over here!" Hiro shouted as he hurled his spear. The gigas easily swatted it out of the air, but he only wanted its attention. The air screamed as the monster lashed out with its mighty arm, but it couldn't so much as graze him. His movements were totally efficient, honed to perfection. A master of the martial arts would have gasped in admiration to see his performance.

Sweat dripped down Hiro's forehead even so. The exhaustion of the climb and the stress of this battle to the death combined to dramatically sap his strength. Still, he continued to dance around the gigas's blows. He found the corners of his mouth curling into a savage grin. Perhaps his fear was making him delirious.

"Want to know a secret?" he asked the gigas. "We've got a big, bad wolf."

Where before he had been leading the monster around by the nose, now it suddenly froze. He had no idea if it understood human speech, but there was no denying it had reacted to *something*.

At long last, Cerberus saw her chance and broke from cover. The wolf streaked past Hiro's side like a speeding bullet, her claws carving the air to ribbons as they traced a clean slash through the gigas's neck. Blood sprayed from its throat like water from a tap as she touched back down. For a moment, the monster faltered.

A certain flame-haired girl did not pass up the opportunity. "I'll finish it!" Liz cried. Lævateinn flared crimson, sending a pulse of scorching heat towards the monster. By the time the blast wave washed over it, Liz had vanished from its sight. A moment later, the air behind it detonated with a weighty *boom*.

Realizing the explosion must have been Liz's handiwork, Hiro picked up a javelin from the ground and flung it, then reached for a second and hurled that too. The gigas knocked neither aside this time; both sank deep into its chest. It fell into panic, writhing about on the ground, spewing blood—and then, abruptly, it stopped. It had finally noticed the state it was in.

Only its upper half was still moving. A shapeless mass that had once been its lower half lay nearby, steadily burning. The gigas screeched, a harsh sound like grinding metal. Hiro retched as the wind carried a nauseating stench into his nostrils. As he clapped a hand over his nose, he at last caught sight of Liz.

She came from out of the sun, swinging Lævateinn in a downward arc. "I'll put you out of your misery!" she cried as the Flame Sovereign's crimson blade carved through the gigas's flesh. White smoke billowed from the creature's bisected torso as its blood evaporated in its veins. Its enormous bulk slumped to the ground, where it silently burned. In the end, she never even gave it a chance to scream.

"Hiro!" Liz cried.

Realizing that she was running to greet him, Hiro tried to open his arms to catch her, but his body wouldn't seem to listen. Perhaps the adrenaline was finally wearing off, or perhaps his exhaustion had caught up with him at last. He couldn't tell. Like a puppet with its strings cut, he fell to his knees and collapsed in the dirt.

Liz's face drew close to his own, her eyes brimming with concern. "Hiro! Stay with me!" she cried. "Tris, help me! It's Hiro, he...! He...!"

Hiro wanted to reassure her, but though his mouth still moved, he couldn't seem to speak. His vision pitched wildly as his consciousness began to fade. With the soft warmth of Liz's arms cradling his head, he fell away into darkness.

*

Meanwhile, on the south road, Dios was at an impasse. A large armed host had appeared to block his passage. A line of heavy infantry stretched across the road ahead. Behind them, heavy cavalry stood at the ready.

"I thought they'd not reveal themselves so soon," he said to his vice-

commander beside him. “They’ve brought two thousand men against fewer than two hundred, the cowards.”

“And they fly no colors,” the vice-commander observed. Indeed, the enemy host carried no identifying emblems, flags or otherwise.

Dios nodded. “Covering their backs in case any nobles start asking questions, no doubt.” Presumably, they meant to pass themselves off as bandits, although no bandits moved in such numbers.

Their standoff continued for some time. Eventually, an emissary rode up to Dios from the enemy lines. He wore a cowl so as to conceal his identity, making his expression impossible to determine. Dios glared at him with stony eyes.

“Does Lady Elizabeth ride with you?” the man asked. He spoke in a lazy drawl.

“Why should I tell you?” Dios replied. “For all I know, you mean her harm.”

“And you are?”

“My name is Dios von Mikhail.”

“Ah, of course. The illustrious Ogre.”

Dios’s eyes narrowed with displeasure at the sound of his own nickname. “You came all this way to mock me?”

“No, I suppose not. You matter little in the end,” said the emissary. He raised his hand and held it in the air. “Let me make this simple. Hand over the sixth princess and I will spare your lives.”

“And you thought I would accept that? You must have lost your wits.”

“Am I to take it, then, that you will not relinquish the princess?”

Dios snorted and broke into a defiant grin. “It seems to me that you’ve forgotten your manners. Let me remind you, I serve under Her Highness’s command, as does every man at my back. You will address us with the respect we are due.”

“I fear I have precious little courtesy to spare for men such as you. So tell me, Ogre—what will it be?”

“Call me that again,” Dios growled, “and I’ll rip your tongue from your

mouth.”

The emissary’s smile widened into a sadistic grin beneath his cowl. “Should have watched *your* manners, boy,” he said as he let his hand fall. Behind him, the line of infantry parted, allowing the heavy cavalry to charge through.

Dios’s eyes narrowed. “You meant to slaughter us all no matter our answer.”

“Not all. I would have left one alive to tell the tale.”

“Treacherous snake.” Scowling, Dios peered over the emissary’s shoulder at the approaching cavalry. They were still a ways away. His eyes filled with fury as they returned to the hooded figure. “At least I can take you with us,” he said, and drove his lance into the man’s chest.

The thrust halted in midair. Dios’s face turned incredulous as the emissary caught his lance with ease. An exquisite sword, trimmed with silver and gold, had sprung as if from nowhere into the man’s hand.

“Is something amiss?”

“Bastard! You wield a spirit weapon?”

Spirits were drawn to the banks of pure water sources, where they sometimes left behind crystals imbued with their own essence. These crystals, which shone with a luster to rival any gemstone, were called spirit stones. They were exceedingly rare; even the imperial territories, vast as they were, only harvested somewhere between three and seven per year, while some smaller nations produced none at all. Accordingly, they commanded a high price. A single spirit stone could fund an entire lifetime of leisure, and their value only increased by the year. No one but the royal family and their closest allies were likely to ever see one in their lifetimes.

“Where did you get that?” Dios demanded.

“That is not for you to know.”

An odd cracking sound filled the air. Dios looked down at his lance to find ice spreading down the haft. He cursed and flung it aside before reaching for the sword at his hip. Behind him, his cavalry had readied their own lances, while his infantry had drawn their swords.

His men would be hard-pressed to stand against a spirit weapon, Dios knew. This emissary was clearly a skilled fighter in his own right, but the spirit's blessing must also be amplifying his physical abilities. Any less and he could not have stopped Dios's lance so easily.

Dios took a deep breath and allowed himself to think. If he were to surrender to anger and engage this emissary, the enemy cavalry would hit before they could finish him. Then he and his soldiers would all be dead.

He raised his sword above his head. "With me, men!" he shouted, his voice echoing across the plain. "If your comrades fall, let them fall! Never look back, only ahead, and ride for all you're worth!"

His men answered with a rousing cheer.

Dios swung his sword down. "Chaaaaarge!"

He drove his heels into his horse's flank and then he was off, galloping for the horizon. In the split second he passed the emissary by, he could have sworn he heard the man whisper something under his breath—

"Is that all? How disappointing."

—but if he was ever to return to his mistress alive, he couldn't afford to look back. Shame rose in his gorge like bile, but he swallowed it down. Channeling his regrets into a howl, he yelled at the top of his lungs, "Follow me if you want to live!"

Another battle cry erupted from behind him. One hundred cavalry and fifty foot soldiers abandoned their wagons to ride or run in his wake. Together they smashed into the oncoming cavalry.

With a triumphant cry, Dios snatched a lance from an enemy soldier. He set about striking rider after rider from their horses.

"Platoon Commander!" his vice-commander shouted from beside him. "The rear's been cut off!"

Dios looked back to see a massacre in progress. The enemy had encircled his infantry and cavalry alike and were in the process of butchering them. He prided himself on having trained his men well—as well as the First Legion, even

—but they stood little chance here. The enemy’s numbers were overwhelming, but it was the heavy armor that truly put the final nail in the coffin. His own men only wore light armor, having hoped to take advantage of their mobility.

“Leave them!” he cried. He had no other choice. They had nowhere near the numbers to ride to their comrades’ rescue.

Even so, his vice-commander hesitated, unwilling to abandon his men. “If we turn back now, we might still save them!”

“Have you gone mad?!” Dios exclaimed. “Look around you!”

“We can’t abandon them, sir! Her Highness entrusted them to our protection!”

“They’re my men too! I’ll not tell you twice!” The vice-commander fell quiet at that—or rather, the anger in Dios’s eyes cowed him into silence.

With fury twisting his face into the visage of an ogre, Dios thrust his lance at the oncoming foe. Again and again his weapon snapped, but every time, he snatched another from an enemy soldier and began sowing carnage anew. “Out of my way, you maggots!” he bellowed.

“You must be the Ogre!” a voice cried in delight. “You are truly as skilled as they say! A fitting opponent to test my steel!”

A rider bore down on Dios through the press, issuing a challenge as he came. The violet band wrapped around his arm marked him as a platoon commander.

“Out of my way!” Dios roared, hurling his lance with all his might. Its tip punched straight through the man’s helm, deforming the metal with the impact. A torrent of blood spurted from within, accompanied by a confused gurgle.

“The commander! He’s do—” The nearby rider’s head flew from his shoulders before he could finish. As a jet of crimson sprayed from the man’s severed neck, Dios gestured right with a bloodstained sword.

“Break through their left flank!” he yelled. “I’ll clear the way! Ride, damn you! Leave the maggots to their pickings!”

If they rode on through the enemy cavalry, they would only find heavy

infantry waiting for them, and archers behind that. To carry straight on was to go to their deaths, but if they broke through the left wing, they would have a clear run to freedom. Even so, it would come at a heavy price. For every man who escaped this battlefield, many would be left to die.

The emissary looked on quietly as Dios carved a path through his foes. "He's a fine warrior," he murmured. "It would be a shame to kill him."

Riders fell from their horses to find their skulls crushed beneath armored boots. Straggling infantry had the life crushed from them in the press. The odds had been hideously unfair from the start. The fighting would be over soon, and the emissary had no doubt that once the dust had settled, his side would have suffered minimal casualties.

As the battle began to turn into a slaughter, three riders approached him. They dismounted and dropped to one knee, laying their hands to their chests.

"Around twenty men broke through, sir," one said. "We have the rest encircled. Shall we finish them?"

"Do as you please," the emissary said. "What are our losses?"

"The sixth princess does not appear to be among the dead, sir. As for our own, our forces have lost one platoon commander and twelve heavy cavalry. We are hastening to assess the wounded as we speak."

The emissary's eyebrows rose beneath his cowl. "More than I'd expected."

"Should we give chase, sir?" the soldier asked.

"You needn't trouble yourselves. They're torn half to shreds as it is. Bandits will finish our work before they ever reach the Gurinda Mark."

"Then you mean to let the sixth princess go, sir?"

"She is not among them. We need not pursue."

"She may have disguised herself," the soldier said.

"That I doubt. She is not given to such subtleties."

"Then begging your pardon, but where is she?"

The emissary fell silent for a moment. "In Baum, I would imagine, having

crossed Mount Himmel.”

“Ought we make for Baum, then?” the soldier asked.

“Our actions here have been conspicuous enough. Any more and we risk drawing attention to ourselves. No, our business here is done. Disband the company.”

The soldier bowed his head. “As you command.”

The emissary turned away, lifting his gaze to the distant Grausam Mountains. Beneath the shadow of his cowl, his eyes glinted like a stalking tiger closing on its prey.

* * *

Located precisely on the border where the grasslands met the desert, the Gurinda Mark’s central town of Linkus was a town of two halves. Its well-to-do citizenry dwelled in the lush greenery of the northern quarter, while its sandy southern quarter housed the poor.

It was in the northern quarter that Margrave von Gurinda resided. His white-walled mansion stood on a rise, giving it a commanding view of the town below. At two storys tall, with four slanted roofs extending crosswise from an octagonal central dome, it was grand enough that any noble would have been proud to call it their home. A high fence ran around the perimeter, interrupted by a central iron gate. A man staggered up to it, then fell to the ground.

The guards on either side of the gate ran to his aid. “Hey, you!” one called out. “Are you all right?”

“Bugger me,” said the other. “Someone’s cut the poor bastard up something fierce.”

The guards rolled the man onto his back and instantly paled. He was covered in slashes, and his body was crusted with blood—dry, but not old. They shared a glance. It was a miracle that he was still breathing.

All of a sudden, the man came to life and grabbed the closer of them. “Take me to Margrave von Gurinda!” he bellowed. “It’s urgent!”

“I don’t have a bloody clue what you’re on about, but get off!” shouted the

guard in his grip.

“Settle down, man! Look at the state of you!” yelled the other.

The man’s muscular arms clung on with unnatural strength. The free guard tried to help his comrade, but even their combined efforts couldn’t pry him loose.

“My name is Dios von Mikhail! I...I serve Lady Celia Estrella! Take me...to the margrave...” He was beginning to lose consciousness.

“I hear you! I hear you! We’ll take you to him! Just let me go!”

“Please...I beg you... There’s...no time...”

The guards looked at one another with equal misgivings. If the man’s tale was true, they could have a serious situation on their hands, but if it was false, they might be severely punished—and they had no time to ascertain the facts one way or the other. The one Dios had grabbed decided the call was above his pay grade. “Tell the captain! Let him figure this out!” he said.

The other guard—the one who had tried to peel Dios away—nodded and vanished into the grounds. Soon, the captain of the guard, realizing something was amiss, emerged from the front gate. He approached Dios and lay a gentle hand on his shoulder.

“Lord von Gurinda is willing to meet with you,” he said. “Now, do you fancy letting my man go?”

The two stared at each other for a moment before Dios released the guard and slumped to the ground. “Please...” he groaned. “Princess Elizabeth... She’s in danger...”

“Aye, we’ll get to that. But first, you need those wounds seen to.”

Before he left, the captain commanded the guards to take Dios to the infirmary. It took both of them to move him, half carrying him between them with his arms around their shoulders. They arrived at the infirmary to find a man waiting inside. He took one look at Dios and raised his eyebrows.

“Normally I would begin with the usual pleasantries,” he said, “but given the circumstances, I think I had best start by asking you what happened.”

This, Dios supposed, was Margrave von Gurinda. His face was just as kindly as Liz had described. The guards lowered Dios onto the bed. As the doctor tended to his wounds, he relayed his story.

“There were a hundred and fifty of us,” he began, his voice heavy with regret. “I’m the only one who made it.”

Many of the survivors had succumbed to their wounds following their flight from the battlefield. One by one, they had died on their horses. After several days, just when it seemed their fortunes could sink no lower, bandits had attacked. Men could only fight for so long on the brink of exhaustion. When Dios had finally broken free in a haze of blood and pain, it was to find that he was the only one left.

Margrave von Gurinda’s face creased in sympathy as he listened. “I see,” he said. “You have suffered more than anyone should. Would that I could say your troubles were at an end.” He paused, unsure how to continue, then shook his head and produced a letter. “This arrived yesterday.”

Dios looked at it warily but took it. His eyes widened as he read through the contents. “By the Divines...” he whispered, looking at the margrave in horror.

“They come with two thousand men,” von Gurinda confirmed, “but worry not. I have no intention of betraying my niece.”

“Even so, against such an enemy...”

“I am well aware of this Warmaiden’s reputation. Word of her feats reaches even here. I would not presume to dream that I could match her on the field. Moreover, I have no hope of petitioning His Majesty while he is away on campaign.”

“Then what? You would hand the princess to her death?”

“As I say, I will do no such thing. Elizabeth is all I have left of my dear sister.”

“They have two thousand men, you said. How many can you gather?”

“Fewer than in times of war,” the margrave said ruefully. “We’ve grown fat with peace these past few decades. The Gurinda Mark maintains a reserve of three thousand men, but not all will come, especially on such short notice. I

should be pleased to see a thousand.”

Dios frowned. “That won’t be enough.” All the more so against the Warmaiden. A commander of her caliber would not let her superior numbers go to her head. She would crush them thoroughly and without mercy. The fields of corpses left in her wake attested to her brutal efficacy.

“Warmaiden or no, we will endure until His Majesty returns. This I swear,” Margrave von Gurinda said.

“When will that be?” Dios asked.

“I received word of his victory five days hence. By now, both he and the first prince ought to be returning to the capital. I have dispatched a messenger already, but it will likely be five days before they arrive, three at the earliest. Until then, we must endure as best we can.”

“Endure,” Dios said thoughtfully, “not win.”

“Precisely. We need only hold out. My scouts tell me that their forces are moving south from Segen towards the Gloire Plains.”

“The Gloire Plains,” Dios repeated. “That’s where it’ll be, then.”

Margrave von Gurinda nodded. “I presume they are making for the Baum border. We will intercept them there.”

“Allow me to ride with you,” Dios said.

“No. I’ve another task for you. I want you to take two hundred men and meet Elizabeth at Fort Alt. It’s hardly impenetrable, but it’s the best protection I can offer. Barricade yourselves in there if you have to. Whatever it takes to buy time.”

Fort Alt lay on the border between Gurinda and Baum, but as it virtually never saw military use, it was barely fit for purpose. It maintained a garrison of fewer than a hundred men, and its facilities were in dire need of repair. Margrave von Gurinda had indeed allowed peace to make him complacent. Still, Dios could not find it in him to criticize the man. Such behavior was not unusual out of wartime, and the margrave had spent his resources on benefiting the people rather than lining his own pockets.

“I can only apologize,” the margrave said. “Had I been more diligent, things would not have come to this.”

“We were the ones to arrive uninvited on your doorstep,” Dios replied. “If either of us owes the other an apology, it’s me.”

It was them who had brought trouble to the margrave’s door. If von Gurinda cared solely for his position, he could have simply handed over Liz and been done with it. Instead, he had chosen to fight, even knowing they had no chance of victory. Dios owed him more than he could ever repay.

“My thanks for your candor,” von Gurinda said, bowing his head.

“Think nothing of it,” Dios said. “If my lady were here, she would say the same.”

“You are gracious indeed.” No sooner did the margrave raise his head than he immediately lowered it again. Dios waited, but the man showed no sign of looking up.

Eventually, he decided to change the topic. “What will you do now?” he asked.

“I mean to ride forth as soon as I raise my men.”

“As you will, then. I ought to be away. The princess will not wait.”

“I will send a messenger ahead to Fort Alt. I implore you, keep Elizabeth safe and sound.”

“Do not doubt it. When next we meet...” Dios held out his hand.

Margrave von Gurinda grasped it with a smile. “With Elizabeth,” he said.

“Aye. I swear it.”

And so, vowing to meet again, the two men went their separate ways.

*

The Third Legion’s encampment made for an arresting sight: a sprawling array of several hundred tents lying eight sel from the Gloire Plains. Within the dingy confines of the commander’s tent in the center, a man and a woman faced each other across a desk. The former cocked his head curiously as the latter pored

over her book.

“Uranos?” he asked. “The Empyrean Sight?”

“That’s right,” said Aura. “Do you know of it?”

“Only as much as any man,” von Spitz said. “That it’s one of the three great arcane eyes. That it’s so rare, not even the álfar possess it. That the second emperor is the only known bearer, past or present.” He paused for a moment as something occurred to him. “Come to think of it, does Prince Stovell not have an álf among his retainers?”

“He does. We’ve spoken several times. I once asked him about Uranos.”

“The álfar are known for their long lives and great wisdom. I don’t doubt he had much to say.”

“It was very enlightening,” Aura agreed. “He said the Empyrean Sight had the power to divine the truth of all creation—heaven, earth, and man alike—and so control the battlefield. Criminally unsporting, he called it.”

“Might he have been speaking in jest? It’s hard to imagine a single eye could house such power.” Von Spitz gave a dismissive shrug but quickly wiped the look from his face once he saw that Aura was pouting.

“Emperor Schwartz had it. That proves it’s real,” she said sulkily. “And álfar don’t tell jokes. I think that’s convincing enough. Don’t you?”

Von Spitz was loath to lie to his mistress, but he didn’t want to argue with her when he had already put her in a mood. Choosing his words carefully, he said, “I meant only that the idea sits poorly with me. Would it not render tactics and strategy meaningless? Besides, as I see it, victory is not something to be seen with the eyes, but grasped with the hands.”

“That’s true, I suppose. It is man who seizes heaven, man who walks the earth, man who commands men. Just looking on makes you no more than a bystander. I’d still like to believe, though—that there really was such a thing as Uranos, once upon a time.”

Aura lowered her eyes to the map spread out on the desk. Von Spitz followed her gaze. Several pawns stood atop the map in various locations. She looked

slowly across it, reminding herself of the lie of the land.

“Margrave von Gurinda has gathered nine hundred men, you said. Are you certain?”

“The Third has some of the finest scouts in the land, my lady,” Spitz replied. “If they say it is so, it is so.”

A province the size of the Gurinda Mark should have been able to field around three thousand soldiers, but with its communications network grown rusty over decades of peace, it was struggling to muster a timely response. Provided they didn’t grow complacent, von Spitz felt confident of a swift and sure victory. Aside from anything else, they had two thousand of the Third Legion’s finest in the Knights of the Royal Black.

“Has Margrave von Gurinda sent his reply?” Aura asked.

Von Spitz straightened and presented her with a letter, only recently arrived. “He refuses,” he said with a sigh. “Just as you predicted.”

Aura scanned the letter and nodded to herself. “Of course he does. I’ll dispatch a messenger tomorrow. Hopefully then we can smooth this over.”

“‘Smooth this over’?” Von Spitz could only assume he had misheard, but Aura’s face told him otherwise. “My lady...a moment, if I may,” he said, leaning wide-eyed over the desk. “If your intention was to make peace, what was all our strategizing for?”

Though the tent now sat empty, it had only recently played host to Aura’s officers and staff, all listening to her present her battle plans. What was the point in that, if she had never intended to carry them out? Come to think of it, what were they doing here at all?

Aura seemed perplexed by his confusion. “In case diplomacy failed, of course. All I ever wanted was to open a dialogue, but the margrave might have been too much of a fool to write back.”

“But...battle is almost joined, my lady. Are things not too far gone?”

“There’s still time. Imperial citizens shouldn’t fight one another. Not for such silly reasons.”

“I do not disagree, but...” Von Spitz trailed off.

He had anticipated this might happen—that his beloved mistress might balk at the final hurdle—and planned accordingly. Pretending to act under Aura’s orders, he had sent several units ahead into the Gurinda Mark with instructions to capture the sixth princess. Going behind Aura’s back made him uncomfortable, but it seemed his decision had been vindicated.

Just as the silence was about to grow awkward, a mud-splattered messenger tumbled into the tent. “My lady! It’s urgent!” he announced. “A force fifteen thousand strong is approaching the border from Lichtein!”

“What?!” Von Spitz stood up from his chair, his mouth open.

Aura’s hand stopped halfway through moving a pawn. “Tell me everything.”

“One of the units you sent to capture the princess reported in, my lady. They were lying in wait near the border when they spotted movement on the Lichtein side, so they sent out scouts. It seems they stumbled across a full-scale military operation.”

Aura’s eyes narrowed as the messenger finished. For his part, von Spitz thought his heart might stop as soon as the man mentioned the soldiers infiltrating Gurinda.

“Sir Spitz.”

Clearly, that point had not escaped Aura’s notice either. Her eyes flashed with anger as they bored into him...but then she shook her head and turned back to the messenger. *This isn’t the time*, she seemed to say.

“I’m sure you’re tired, but I need you to do something,” she instructed the man.

“Anything, my lady!” the messenger replied.

His enthusiasm earned him a smile from Aura. “Tell Margrave von Gurinda I want to join forces,” she said. “I’ll draw up the letter now.”

A pen and paper lay on the desk. Aura reached for the pen, dipped the nib into the ink, and began to write. For a while, the tent was silent but for her scratching. Once she finished, she looked up with an angry glare at von Spitz,

who by then had collected himself and was debating whether he ought to apologize.

“By all rights, I should be furious about what you did. And I am. But I’ll excuse it.”

Von Spitz blinked. “My lady?”

“If you hadn’t sent those men to the border, Lichtein would have caught us unawares. So you’re excused. This time.”

“Do you truly mean it?” Von Spitz leaped to his feet with elation.

Aura shot him a glance as she handed her finished letter to the messenger. “But I still have to punish you or it will set a poor example. You will earn your forgiveness in battle.” With her piece said, she picked her book back up from the desk and resumed her silent reading.

Gazing at her fondly, von Spitz stepped up from his chair and fell to one knee. “I will not fail you, my lady,” he vowed, his voice swelling with conviction. “I swear, I will repay this kindness!”

Chapter 3: Awakening

“I hope he comes to soon,” Liz murmured as she cast another worried glance at Hiro’s bed. Though he appeared to be sleeping peacefully, he hadn’t once opened his eyes since falling unconscious. A doctor had looked him over but failed to find any clear reason for his prolonged slumber.

“Not long now, I’ll wager. He’ll be up and about before you know it.” Tris stroked his goatee as he watched Liz. “You ought to get some sleep yourself, Your Highness. It wouldn’t do to be passed out when the whelp finally wakes.”

“I suppose.” Liz nodded. She looked outside the window, where a boundless night sky bathed the town below in starlight. This was Natur, Baum’s first and only city. Built in a shallow basin, the town gently curved down on all sides to meet the austere white oblong of its central temple: Frieden, the Spirit King’s sanctum. It was there that the sixth princess and her retainers had been received.

“I’ll come by again tomorrow to wake him up.” Liz brushed Hiro’s cheek one last time, then turned to leave. As the door clicked shut, silence rolled in on the night air, seeking to fill the room in her absence...and failing. A low groan emitted from between Hiro’s sleeping lips to keep it at bay. His face twisted in pain.

He was dreaming.

It began with a start. Suddenly, he found himself on a battlefield glutted with corpses—a mind-numbing quantity of dead stretching as far as the eye could see, the hate-steeped progeny of two great armies. Blood seeped into the earth to stain it scarlet. The heavens wept fine rain.

The boy was in the center of the melee. His black garb fluttered in the wind and his arm moved to match it, sending his silver sword slicing through the air—an easy motion, like waving away a fly. Five heads flew. His attention moved on

and he sprinted away.

It was the high commander's head he wanted. That was the most efficient way to end the fighting and the surest path to victory. Still, the enemy would not relinquish it easily. A thousand elite soldiers stood in his way, their front lines packed as dense as a solid wall. To any ordinary man, the high commander would have seemed impossibly far away, but he slipped through their ranks unhindered, lopping off heads as he ran.

Whether short or long, all paths reach their end in time.

What must the high commander have thought to see the boy approach?

"Impossible! How did you break through?!" he blustered, but received only silence for an answer. He looked at the boy's bloodstained face and swallowed hard. The bottomless depths of those jet black eyes seemed to swallow his very soul.

"Those eyes, like black glass... I know you, boy." His voice trembled, perhaps in anticipation, perhaps in fear. This was the one they whispered of throughout the surrounding nations: a soldier in service to a once-ruined nation now rising with unstoppable force, a man in whose eyes all of creation bared its secrets. Regalo, they called him. A gift from the Spirit King.

"And here I'd taken the rumors for mindless prattle! So that's your Uranos, eh?" The high commander stepped forward, readying his colossal greataxe. "It'll make a fine trophy when I rip it from your corpse!" He raised a burly hand. Soldiers rushed in to surround the boy on all sides.

"You've got balls to come alone, I'll give you that. A pity you weren't blessed with more brains." Uranus or no, he was only one man. How dangerous could he be? "I'll make you squirm before I let you di—"

The high commander's head toppled from his shoulders to smack into the mud. The surrounding soldiers looked on, dumbfounded. Nobody but the twinblack boy had yet processed what had happened.

With a graceful bound, he launched into a deadly dance. Metal gleamed dully as a few soldiers regained their wits and stabbed at him with their spears, but the weapons only passed harmlessly before his eyes. More spears followed,

seeking his life. He leaped high to avoid them, lopping off heads as he went. Every tender stroke of his gleaming blade sent more falling, like overripe fruit shaken from the tree.

A ripple of fear spread through the enemy ranks. All this had been the work of a moment. Such feats were beyond the reach of men. This boy encroached on the realm of the monstrous.

Raindrops burst on his silver sword as it clove a man in two, armor and all. Soldier after soldier fell, powerless to repel his onslaught, their bodies splashing limply to the ground to lie half-submerged in muddy puddles. Jets of blood mixed with the falling rain, shrouding the battlefield in an overpowering stench.

“Y-You— Agh!”

He didn’t even give them time to cry out. Before long, he stood alone among mountains of corpses.

Cut the head from the beast and the body dies. The boy’s allies swept in to rout the leaderless army as though crushing ants. Cheers and battle cries filled the plain as they pursued their fleeing foes.

The boy left them to their slaughter and returned to the main encampment.

“Mars!” came a cry. There was no telling who first uttered it, but more and more voices took it up until it became an air-shaking cheer.

“Mars! Mars! Mars! Mars!”

Thousands of soldiers chanted his name, their voices reverberating to his core. The very ground shook with their acclaim.

With every step he took, the sea of men parted before him. The royal road, they called it. Two long ranks formed on either side of him, between which he strode with his head held high.

“Mars! Mars! Mars! Mars!”

As he walked on, a young man appeared to block his path. The youth raised his hand, and suddenly there was silence. He approached the boy, his brow furrowed with anger.

“What is this I hear of my strategist fighting on the front line?”

“I had to do something to break the stalemate,” the boy protested. “We’re spread too thin across too many fronts. Once we’re done here, we’ll need to head west— Ouch!” A finger prodded him in the forehead, cutting him short.

The young man’s lips curled into an impish grin. “The next time the urge takes you to strike out on your own, tell me. We shall lead the van together, and our foes shall cower before us.”

“Then who would command the army? You’re better placed here, taking it easy in the back.”

“You would condemn me to the dullest of fates, my friend. Still, what’s done is done. There’s no sense in lamenting it.” The young man clapped the boy on both shoulders. “I’m glad to find you safe, Schwartz. I swear I lost a hundred years of my life when I heard you’d taken to the field yourself. Fortunately, I regained those years when word reached me of your triumph.”

“Please, Artheus. Don’t be so dramatic.” Schwartz thought for a moment. “Oh, that’s right. I brought back the commander’s head. What do you want to do with it?” He jerked his thumb over his shoulder. An infantryman stood behind him, carrying a white box.

“I still recall how you threw up at the sight of your first corpse. To think the day would arrive when you would come before me bearing heads... Men truly can grow used to anything.”

Schwartz gave a small laugh. “I’m still not used to it. Not the killing, not the death, none of it. But if I let that get to me, it’ll be my head that rolls.”

“Quite so.” Artheus nodded in approval and turned to the soldier carrying the box. “No need to ascertain its veracity. Return him to his homeland and ensure he’s well cared for. Our enemy he may have been, but we are no better than beasts if we neglect our respect for the dead.”

“At once, Your Majesty!” The soldier bowed deep.

“Now, come! Raise a glass with me, brother!” Artheus draped an arm over Schwartz’s shoulders. “We must tell the Spirit King of our glorious victory.”

“I’m still underage,” Schwartz replied. “I can’t drink.”

“Worry not! I’ve had freshly squeezed grape juice specially prepared!”

“You think of everything, don’t you?” Schwartz smiled ruefully at the young man at his side. His comrade in arms. He really did never change.

Ah...I see now. This must be a dream. You couldn’t be here otherwise.

Just a dream. A fond recollection of a long-lost memory. A chance convergence of time and space where his path crossed once more with those who were gone. The passage of time could never dull the brilliance of this moment...but all dreams must come to an end.

“Come on, Hiro, wake up. What’s taking you so long?”

A tearful voice reached his ears. Hiro forced his eyelids open to find a beautiful girl with crimson hair sitting in front of him.

“Liz?” he whispered as he pushed himself upright.

Liz’s eyes widened with joy. She flung her arms around him. “Oh, thank goodness! You’re back!” she cried. “I thought you might never wake up!”

As she continued to gush, Hiro looked absentmindedly around the room. There was a mustiness to the air, as though it hadn’t been used for a long time, but it had still been maintained: someone had kept the old writing desk by the window neatly arranged, and while the books on the nearby bookcase had grown yellow with age, they were clean of dust. Two flags stood by the windowsill, one bearing a set of scales on a white field, the other a dragon clutching a silver sword on a black field. Hiro’s bed lay by the wall, next to the door.

Hiro tried to ask where they were, but Liz began mothering him before he could speak. “You don’t hurt anywhere, do you?” she asked.

“I... No, not particularly. Anyway, where are we?”

“Oh, right! So, after you passed out, we took you down the mountain as fast as we could...”

Liz recounted her story. After he had lost consciousness, she and the soldiers had taken him to a nearby town for treatment, but they had alerted Baum to their presence in the process. Soon enough, they found themselves surrounded

by a company of knights, but as they braced themselves to be taken captive, quite the opposite had happened.

“This is a poor place of limited means,” the captain had said, “but Her Grace the archpriestess invites you to accompany us to Frieden, where you might be better accommodated.”

In place of a king, Baum was ruled by an archpriestess who acted as stewardess of the nation. Out of consideration for Hiro and their wounded, Liz had deigned to go with them—and the rest, she concluded, was history.

“Now, come on, let’s get breakfast!” she said, tugging Hiro’s arm. “You must be starving!”

Hiro smiled awkwardly, but nodded. “I guess, yeah. I could do with somethi— Ah!” He tried to stand, but his legs failed to take his weight. Liz caught him and held him steady.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

“I, uh...I think so,” he said. “I guess I’ve only just woken up. I should have given myself a minute.”

“Tell me if you’re struggling, okay? We still need to have the doctor take a proper look at you.” Liz opened the door to reveal a woman prostrating herself on the other side. She and Hiro both cried out in alarm and shied away.

“Good morning,” the woman said. “You slept well, I hope?”

She wore a white kimono in the Japanese style, with a black hakama on top. Her skin, clear and luscious as the fresh morning dew, seemed to glow as it caught the sunlight. The beauty of her face was remarkable enough, but a sensuality lurked beneath that only heightened her allure. Combined with the soothing fragrance that wafted from her skin, the effect was nigh irresistible.

“I am the archpriestess, stewardess of Baum,” she said. As she bowed her head, her hair fell about her shoulders in a waterfall of midnight blue. With her ears now bared, Hiro could see that they were too long and tapered to belong to a human.

She noticed him staring. “Do my ears interest you?” she asked.

“I, um...no, I...” he stammered. “I just thought they were an odd shape.”

She gave a little laugh. “So they must appear, to a human.” Fortunately, she didn’t seem offended. She touched a finger to them, smiling.

Liz jabbed an elbow into Hiro’s ribs. When he turned, she brought her mouth to his ear. “She’s an álf,” she whispered. “They’re known for their long lives, but they’re all incredibly beautiful too.”

“Huh. I did think she seemed...otherworldly, somehow.”

Though she’s no prettier than you, he wanted to say...as though he could be that smooth in his wildest dreams. The archpriestess watched as they whispered to each other, her kindly smile never dropping.

“Oh, and they’re really smart!” Liz continued. “My eldest brother actually has an álf among his advisors, though he’s—”

“Your Highness!” a gruff voice interrupted. “What are you— Aha! You again, whelp! I ought to have known!”

Hiro’s eyes went wide. “Huh? But I haven’t done anything!”

Tris and all his bearish bulk advanced on him, face twisted in rage, but screeched to a halt as the archpriestess stepped between them.

“Master Tris, I must ask that you remain quiet inside the Spirit King’s sanctum,” she said, gently but firmly.

Tris harrumphed, but relented. “Apologies, your grace,” he said, falling to one knee.

“Thank you for understanding.” She turned back to Hiro and Liz and stepped to the side, clearing the way. “Allow me to show you to breakfast. There, you may talk to your hearts’ content.”

“Uh, right. Please,” said Hiro.

“Thank you!” exclaimed Liz. “I’m absolutely famished!”

The three of them filed out, the archpriestess in the lead with Hiro and Liz in tow. “That’s twice now, whelp. I’ll not forget this,” Tris muttered as they passed. Hiro shuffled ahead a little faster but otherwise ignored him.

Trying to distract himself from the naked bloodlust emanating from behind his back, he called out to the archpriestess. "Where are we going?"

"We have a dining hall in the southern quarter. Please take care to stay close. It would be easy to get lost."

Frieden, the Spirit King's sanctum, was broadly divided into four quarters: central, east, south, and west. The central quarter comprised the Baptismal Font, where the Spirit King was enshrined; here newborn babies were brought, as well as newcomers to Frieden. The eastern quarter served as a training ground for apprentice priestesses, and as such was barred to outsiders. The western quarter, where Hiro and Liz were staying, formed the apprentice priestesses' lodgings, while the southern quarter was a rest area; this was where Tris and the soldiers had spent the night.

On their way to the dining hall, the archpriestess stopped and turned to Hiro. "Master Hiro...you are yet to be baptized, are you not?"

"Baptized?" Hiro asked.

"Huh? You've really never been baptized?" Liz sounded surprised, but it wasn't his fault. He'd only just arrived from another world, after all.

"Not that I know of," he said.

"In that case," said the archpriestess, "might you accompany me to the Baptismal Font?"

"I suppose that has to come first," said Liz. "Make a good impression on the Spirit King, won't you?"

"Hmph," Tris muttered from behind them. "Let him curse the whelp and be done with it."

The archpriestess turned to Liz. "I shan't postpone your breakfast. Please go on ahead. You know the way to the dining hall, I trust?"

"Of course," Liz said. "I've been here before. I know my way around."

"Then, with your leave, I shall escort Master Hiro."

"By all means. Don't worry, Hiro, it's nothing to be scared of. It'll be over before you know it."

Liz continued ahead with Tris in tow. The archpriestess watched them go. Once they were out of sight, without warning, she took Hiro's hand. "After me, if you please," she said, then noticed his discomfort. "I cannot risk you going astray," she explained.

"R-Right! Got it. Sorry, you just...kinda took me by surprise." Faced with her smile and its womanly charm, Hiro's heart felt ready to explode.

For a while, they silently wended their way through white-walled pathways. Before long, Hiro grew thoroughly disoriented. Their route twisted and turned this way and that, and he could swear they took the same passage more than once. The path ahead seemed to grow dimmer and dimmer until at last they emerged into an open space.

"We have arrived," the archpriestess said. "Welcome to the Baptismal Font."

"Whoa..." Hiro breathed in astonishment. The archpriestess released his hand and left him alone, but he was so spellbound that he didn't notice.

Ahead, the passageway abruptly broke off as though severed with a blade, giving way to a lush forest. Hiro's legs unconsciously carried him forward. The air was clear and blue like ice, and its caress felt chilly on his skin. Birdsong hung in the stillness.

Beyond the forest lay a wide clearing. In the middle, framed by a colonnade, sat a spring, its waters sparkling with light. Two colossal statues cast in bronze towered on the other side. A white orb floated between them, glowing with a sublime radiance.

As Hiro knelt to touch the water, the foliage behind him rustled. He wheeled around in alarm.

"Thank you for waiting, Master Hiro. I will now begin your baptism."

There stood the archpriestess, clad in a shawl so sheer that the snowy white of her skin showed through its weave. Her ample breasts, with their sensual tips, were only barely hidden. Beneath lay the curve of her slender waist; farther down yet, the fork of her legs plunged into shadow. All of her was on display, pale and pure and dazzling. It would have been more modest if she had been wearing nothing.

“Is something wrong?” she asked.

“No, I...” Hiro fought for words. “What does this baptism involve, exactly?”

“You will receive the blessing of the Spirit King.”

“Can’t I...do that alone?”

“Yours is something of a special case.”

“Special how?”

Hiro was trying his hardest to keep his eyes on the ground, but from the rustle of footsteps on grass, he could tell she was drawing closer.

“I fear I cannot say. All I can offer you is impetus.”

He knew she had stooped by the way her voluptuous thighs dipped into view. A gentle hand settled on his shoulder, then traced up his neck to cup his cheek. *Raise your head*, it bid him, and he was powerless to disobey. He looked up to find her face only inches from his nose.

“I am overjoyed to find you safely returned.”

A tear trickled from her midnight eyes as her lips gently closed over his own.

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“Tris!” Liz cried. “Have you seen Hiro? I can’t find him anywhere!”

“Calm yourself, Your Highness,” said Tris. “A princess mustn’t be seen rushing hither and thither like some harried maid.”

“But he’s gone! The Baptismal Font was empty! What if he’s gotten lost?!”

“The boy has the archpriestess with him. He’s in no danger.”

“Well then, where is he?! Oh, I can just picture him crying his eyes out!”

Liz collapsed into her chair and buried her head in her hands. Freshly emptied plates and bowls littered the table before her. Cerberus lay at her feet, dozing contentedly.

“The boy is sixteen years of age,” said Tris, seated in the opposite chair. “He is too old for such things. Perhaps he has simply—” He cut himself off as a familiar figure came into view. “It seems he has returned, Your Highness.”

“What?” Liz swiveled around to find Hiro standing in the doorway, looking oddly fatigued. His baptism must have been taxing.

“Hiro! This way!” She waved him over. He began walking towards them, though apparently too slowly for Liz’s liking. “Oh, just get over here!” she exclaimed, before running up to him, seizing his hand, and pulling him into the next chair over.

“You look exhausted,” she said. “Was it really that tiring?”

“Yeah,” he replied. “Well, mentally, anyway.”

“What do you mean?”

“Honestly, I didn’t know where to look. And there was a lot of...touching involved.”

“It did look like the old man had a lot of people to get through today,” Liz said. “That baby face of yours might have given him some funny ideas.”

Hiro paused. “Old man?”

“Yeah, you know. The old man who does the baptisms.”

“What?”

“What?”

As they frowned at each other in confusion, a shadow fell between them.

“Did you enjoy your breakfast, Lady Celia Estrella?” a female voice asked. Hiro turned around to see the archpriestess.

“Oh, it was wonderful!” Liz said. “The food here is just as good as I remember.”

“I am pleased to hear it. Do you intend to stay another night?”

Liz put a finger to her chin. “Hmm...I’m tempted, but we really ought to be going.”

“A pity. I pray you find the time to visit again someday.”

“I’ll drop by soon. I’ll need to pick up my soldiers sooner or later.”

It would be too dangerous to take their wounded with them. Anything could

happen between here and their destination. If they were attacked, they would be hard-pressed to fight back with injured men to protect. The archpriestess nodded in understanding. She must have surmised as much.

“As you say. Might I prevail upon you to join her, Master Hiro? I would be glad of the opportunity to speak with you again.”

Hiro blinked, taken aback. “Me? Uh...sure. I’d be happy to.”

“Hiro?” Liz scrutinized him. “You’ve gone all red. You haven’t caught a cold, have you?”

“No, nothing like that! It’s nothing! Don’t worry about it!”

The archpriestess gave a little laugh. “Well, time is upon me, I fear. I must excuse myself.”

“Thank you,” Liz said. “I’ll never forget everything you’ve done for us.”

“To offer succor to troubled souls is the duty of all who serve the Spirit King. Should you ever find yourselves in need, I will be glad to lend what aid I may.”

“Do you mean it? Thank you so much!”

“Ah, one last thing. We have horses stabled outside. They are yours to use as you wish.” With a formal bow, the archpriestess excused herself.

Liz watched her go. Once the woman was out of sight, she sat back down and peered at Hiro. “You really are bright red, you know,” she said.

Hiro began to panic. “It’s nothing! Just your imagination! Come on, let’s get going! Time’s wasting!” He grabbed her wrist and pulled.

“I mean, if you say so...” Liz looked baffled. “What’s the sudden hurry?”

“No hurry! I don’t have a clue what you’re talking about! Let’s just go!”

From the shadows some distance away, the archpriestess watched their exchange. Once they had departed, she turned around and began to walk.

Her path took her to the northern quarter of the Spirit King’s sanctum: the Baptismal Hall, where only Baum’s reigning archpriestess was permitted to set foot. There, a sphere floated in the air, radiating a dazzling light. She stared at it awhile. Those who extolled her beauty claimed her smile never faded, but she

was not smiling now.

“I fear I no longer comprehend the will I serve. To what end have you recalled the Hero King from his rest? O Spirit King, father to us all—I beseech you, heed my prayer.”

An eerie silence fell, as though she stood on the edge of the world.

“And still you do not answer,” the archpriestess sighed.

She lifted her eyes to the two great statues flanking the sphere. Anybody in Aletia would recognize the figures they depicted, for they were two of the Twelve Divines. One was a young man, fair of feature, with his sword thrust into the earth: Leon Welt Artheus von Grantz, the Lionheart, founder of the empire. The other figure stood with both arms raised, holding his sword to the heavens: Held Rey Schwartz von Grantz, the Hero King, who built what his predecessor dreamed.

“I beg you, Lord Artheus,” she whispered. “Keep Lord Schwartz safe from harm.”

*

Liz’s company put Natur behind them and soon came to the border. Though they now numbered fewer than seventy, they still rode with enough horses that the constant thunder of hooves set the nerves on edge. Liz took her natural place at the head of the column, her crimson hair streaming behind her as she deftly guided her steed. Hiro shared her saddle, clinging onto her waist.

“Are we really there already?” he asked.

“Yep. Not far now to the Gurinda Mark.”

Tris must have overheard the exchange because he pulled his horse up beside them. “Our foreriders haven’t returned, Your Highness,” he said, knitting his brows. “There’s no telling what might await us. I say we ride for another sel, then release the horses and proceed on foot.”

“Do you think my brother might be up to something?” Liz asked.

“As likely as not. At any rate, it’ll do us no harm to be cautious.”

“All right, then. We’ll do that.” She nodded and turned back to the front.

The road between Baum and the Gurinda Mark passed through a parched wasteland for most of its span. Around a third of the Mark's area was arid terrain, wanting for water and poor of soil, and some of those qualities bled through even to the Baum side of the border. The land was dry and dusty, dotted with small sand dunes and crumbled sandstone cliffs. No grass or trees grew there. The place was nigh on desert.

The company dismounted their horses on the edge of the wasteland and let them run free. "Proceed with caution, everyone," Liz said. She signaled with her eyes to the soldiers and set out.

Cautiously they ventured onward, keeping to the cover of the cliffs so as to stay out of sight. If their pace held, they would reach the Gurinda Mark within half an hour.

"Still neither hide nor hair of our foreriders, Your Highness," Tris said. "Something's afoot, and I like it not."

"Agreed," said Liz. "We might well be walking into a trap." Following his lead, she took hold of a nearby rock face and began to climb. Once on top, they would be high enough to see across the border. She noticed the concern in Hiro's eyes and flashed him a reassuring smile. "It'll be fine. It's Uncle's land," she said, although she seemed to be trying to convince herself as much as anyone else.

Tris hauled himself up to the top of the cliff, which offered a commanding view of the road ahead. He crept forward as far as he could, keeping low. After a short while, he signaled to Liz. Evidently, he had seen something or he would have come back in person.

Liz approached the lip of the cliff warily and peered over. She almost cried out in shock, before hurriedly clapping her hands to her mouth. Only despair lay below. She rubbed her eyes, unwilling to believe what she was seeing, but when she looked again, reality was still there, cold and cruel. Tears welled up in the corners of her eyes.

"How awful..."

On the point where the road crossed into the Gurinda Mark lay the mutilated corpses of her ten foreriders. Various missing parts suggested they had not died

easily. Whoever had killed them had likely tortured them first.

Behind the bodies stood three thousand enemy soldiers, their heads wrapped in brown cloth and their bodies clad in leather armor that left the arms and chest exposed. Each carried a curved sword on his hip, as well as a spear and an elongated oval shield driven into the ground at their feet. The banner at their head fluttered in the harsh desert wind, depicting a tiger on a brown field.

“Those are Lichtein forces,” Tris said, grimacing.

The desert wolves of Lichtein were renowned for their brutality. The peoples they conquered faced a choice between slavery and death. Their society still retained the slave trade that had been abolished in so many other nations.

“I can see that!” Liz said. “But... But that doesn’t make sense! What are they doing *here*?!”

Long years under the empire’s shadow had cowed the Duchy of Lichtein into placidity. It had been decades since so much as a skirmish had broken out between the two nations. Their peace was anchored in Lichtein’s slave trade: as the Grantzian Empire had abolished slavery, it instead extracted a profit from captured civilians or unransomable enemy commanders by selling them to Lichtein. Not only did the empire—with its many warfronts—make for a reliable source of human bodies, but it was so large and powerful that an invasion would be suicidal. All conventional wisdom indicated that Lichtein should have no reason to attack them.

“There’s only one reason they’d be waiting here, Your Highness. They’re after you.” Tris cast a hawkish gaze over the army. “How they knew you’d be passing this way is a question all its own...but regardless, we’d best retreat to Baum.”

Liz shook her head. “We can’t. I won’t bring war to the archpriestess’s doorstep.”

“They’ll not invade Baum, Your Highness. They’d earn the enmity of every nation on the continent.”

“They’ve already committed an act of war. If they’re willing to invade the Grantzian Empire, do you really think they’ll hesitate to burn the Spirit King’s sanctum?”

“I...” For a moment, Tris struggled for words. “No, I suppose not.”

“We have to find a way to break through and meet up with Uncle’s forces.”

“I’d not hold out hope. If they’re here, odds are they came through Berg Fortress,” Tris said. Both Fort Alt and Berg Fortress lay on the way from their position to Lichtein. If the enemy had made it this far, there was a good chance that both had already fallen. “Besides, they can’t trespass on imperial lands for long. The Fourth will come to our aid soon enough.”

“But if they get tired of waiting for me, they’ll turn on the nearby settlements. They might even attack Baum.” Liz stared at the army below, imagining them torching towns and farms, putting the inhabitants to the sword. She clenched her fist and pounded it against the earth. “I can’t stand by and let innocent people get hurt on my account.”

“We’d have no hope against an army of that size. If you were to come to harm —”

Liz cut him off. “The royal family must always be willing to fight in the people’s defense, no matter the odds.”

Tris fell silent for a moment. “And you’re settled on this course?”

“Of course I am. I’m the sixth princess of the empire. This is my duty.”

“You always were a stubborn one, right enough. Well, the least I can do is make sure you’re not alone.”

Liz smiled. “I’ll be counting on you.”

They climbed back down to the bottom of the cliff, where their subordinates waited in the shadow of the rocks. As soon as she touched the ground, Liz straightened up and ran to Hiro, covered in dust she had forgotten to brush off.

“We’re in for heavy fighting,” she said, “so I’m sending you back to Baum.”

Hiro struggled to follow. “What?”

“We can’t afford to have you with us. It’ll be safer for everyone, you most of all.”

“I want to stay. Let me fight with you.” Hiro sounded determined. For all that,

though, he had never fought a real battle. When Liz glanced down, she could see his legs trembling.

“You can’t,” Liz said, hardening her heart. “Go back the way we came. Get yourself to safety.”

For a moment, Hiro seemed about to give in, but then he steeled himself. “I helped against the gigas, didn’t I? Maybe I could...”

For a moment Liz’s eyes widened with joy but then clouded over again before settling into grim resolution. “Let me be as clear as I can,” she said. “I don’t want you with us. You’ll just be a distraction.”

Her words struck Hiro like a hammer. He swayed on the spot but then clenched his fists and stood his ground. For a while, he remained there, mouth agape, knowing he should be bursting with objections but failing to come up with anything to say, until Liz laid a tender hand on his cheek.

“It’ll be fine. We’ll meet again, I’m sure of it.” The kindness in her voice felt somehow forced, as though she didn’t quite believe her own words. “Thank you for coming with me this far.”

If she said any more, she would surely end up asking him to stay. She ran her thumb regretfully over his cheek one last time.

“It really has been fun, you know. Traveling with you. I’m sorry it has to end so soon.”

And he knew that was goodbye.

*

“Are you certain you’ll not regret that, Your Highness?” Tris asked gently.

“I’m certain. We’re in for a grueling fight. I don’t want to drag him into it if I don’t have to.”

He had been so very eager to please. If Liz had asked, he would undoubtedly have fought for her until his last breath—and that was precisely why she couldn’t let him. She could not allow such kindness to perish on this battlefield.

“Here they come!” she shouted.

In the distance, a black shadow rose into the air. It grew in size until it filled the sky like a great stormcloud, then arced downward to fall on them in a deluge of wood and steel.

“Bodies low, shields high!” Liz commanded. The soldiers answered with a roar. Thousands of arrows rained down on them not a moment later, battering their shields like a barrage of hailstones. By the time the din abated, countless wooden shafts studded every one of the heavies’ shields.

“Shield wall! Form up!”

The heavies assembled their shields into a barrier—as wide across as six men standing abreast—and readied for the enemy charge. Liz’s company had chosen the base of a narrow canyon to make their stand, with sheer cliffs on either side. Here the terrain would compensate for their lesser numbers. Even three thousand men could not charge through solid rock; in such an enclosed space, the enemy would have to fight them on even terms.

Liz hurled a javelin into the oncoming ranks. It struck home and a soldier toppled with a gurgle, but two more leaped over his corpse to take his place.

“Archers! Loose!” she cried, swinging Lævateinn down. A volley of arrows soared over her head from the back lines. Fired from such close range, nearly all found their mark. As the enemy’s front line toppled, their bodies tangled the feet of those behind them, but the pileup did nothing to slow the cohort’s overall momentum; those farther back simply trampled over their comrades. As they drew closer, they raised an air-shaking battle cry.

“Your Highness! Stand clear!”

The heavies tensed their arms and gritted their teeth, bracing themselves for the impact. Suddenly the wind changed, whipping up a cloud of sand to swallow their ranks. A moment later, a thunderous crash resounded through the canyon, followed by the clangor of clashing metal.

Liz drove Lævateinn forward with a cry, blowing the sand cloud aside with the force of her thrust. She felt the blade bite, tore it back out, and swung it sideways. Sensing rather than seeing her targets, she struck out with a lightning series of blows. By the time the winds changed back and cleared the air again, corpses littered the ground around her.

A short distance away, Tris struck out at his foes with a spear. “You’re too far out, Your Highness!” he shouted. “Fall back!”

“Not yet! Let me take down as many as I can!”

A group of soldiers charged for Liz, jostling one another against the narrow cliff walls. They bellowed wordlessly as they approached, swinging wildly with their weapons.

“You thought you’d hit me with that?!” With a single stroke, Liz dispatched a man lunging for her. He fell to the ground, coughing up his own blood.

A growl ripped through the air, followed by a ragged scream as Cerberus tore out a second man’s throat. The wolf dove from soldier to soldier, reaping lives with fang and claw wherever she landed. Her white pelt soon grew matted with blood.

Liz pivoted on her right leg and swung diagonally down at a soldier trying to flank her. He reeled back, his arm lopped off at the elbow. Ignoring his agonized scream, she spied an enemy in the corner of her vision and ran him through, then, letting her momentum carry her around, lashed out at the man to his left and struck off his head. Finally, she finished off the man whose arm she had taken with a clean decapitation.

“This’ll keep you busy!”

A fireball erupted from Lævateinn’s blade and burst into a sea of flame. Funneled into the narrow confines of the canyon as they were, there was no arresting the Lichtein column’s momentum. A chorus of screams rose as their charge carried them straight into the wall of fire. Men burned to death by the score, filling the battlefield with the stench of scorched flesh. Liz took this chance to cut through the isolated knot of enemy soldiers that separated her from her allies. When she returned to Tris, only corpses lay in her wake.

“Your Highness! Are you hurt?!”

“I’m fine, but that wasn’t the last of them. Prepare for the next wave.”

Now that she finally had a moment to breathe, Liz’s thoughts turned to Hiro. She had not intended their parting to be so cruel. Her heart ached with regret as she remembered the hurt in his eyes. If fate saw fit to bring them together

again, she resolved to offer him a true and sincere apology. Hopefully, that would be enough to earn his forgiveness...but there was no point dwelling on such things now. *The battle has only just begun*, she thought to herself with a rueful smile as she scratched Cerberus's head. *Once it's over, I can worry about making things right.*

"More coming!" Tris bellowed.

"Let's bloody their noses! Archers, fill them with arrows! Heavy infantry, advance!"

The heavies charged forward beneath the archers' supporting fire, holding their shields in front of them in an unbroken wall. Dismay spread across the enemy soldiers' faces, but they had no way of stopping—the men behind forced them onwards. When the two sides smashed together, the heavies held, but the enemy front line went flying back into the second. Spears jabbed out through gaps in the shield wall to finish off any men lying on the ground.

Seeing they had broken the enemy line, the heavies took apart the shield wall. Liz and Tris threaded through with the light infantry. While they finished off the wounded, the second rank of heavies advanced from the rear to join them.

"That's it! Push them back!" Liz shouted.

Little could inspire a soldier more than their commander fighting alongside them. Indeed, Liz's men showed no hesitation in the face of their numerical disadvantage, only a burning desire to defend their mistress. Their zeal drove them forward more than their fear held them back, turning them into their enemy's worst nightmare. Lichtein soldiers fell before them in droves.

Such fervor, however, could be a double-edged sword—especially when it blinded them to their surroundings.

"Oh no..."

Liz was first to see it. She looked up at the sky and paled. The light infantry, flush with triumph, left her behind as they continued their advance.

Tris realized something was amiss and wheeled around. "Are you hurt, Your Highness?"

“Tris! Look up!” Urgency turned Liz’s shout into a scream. “Shields up, now! Cerberus, to me!”

She pulled Cerberus close with her left arm even as she signaled to her soldiers with her right, but her efforts came too late. The light infantry stared dumbly up into the air, their wits dulled by dismay. Seconds later, enough arrows to cloud the sky thundered down on them.

The barrage fell on friend and foe alike, plunging the battlefield into chaos. Once it passed, the ground was a carpet of wooden shafts. Only small spiked humps here and there marked where bodies lay. It was hard enough to even recognize them as human, let alone tell which side they had been on. None of them moved. The light infantry had been annihilated.

“Your Highness! Are you harmed?!” Tris shouted. Several arrows protruded from his back, but he was still up and moving. They didn’t seem to have done him serious injury.

The heavies’ faces fell as they saw how the battle had turned. Tris barked orders, trying to instill some fight back into them. “Reform your ranks on the double! Secure the canyon mouth and halt their charge!” It drove the pain of his wounds from his mind as he ran to Liz’s side.

“Got a little careless there, didn’t I?” Liz grimaced as she yanked an arrow from her left arm and tossed it aside. Cerberus watched uneasily as blood oozed from the wound, but she gave the wolf’s head a reassuring scratch. Several heavy infantry rushed past to reform the shield wall on the front line.

“You’ll need that seen to,” Tris said.

“One bandage and it’ll be right as rain. Don’t worry about me. Let me count our losses.”

“Leave that to others, Your Highness. You need medical—”

“Battalion Commander!” A heavy infantryman cut in.

Already on edge due to the dire situation, Tris wheeled around with a terrible scowl. “What?!”

“It’s the enemy forces! They’re up to something!”

A vein throbbed in Tris's forehead. "And what's that bloody well supposed to mean?!"

"I... I mean... Well, see for yourself, sir!"

The man pointed towards the enemy army, where a surreal scene was unfolding. Around two hundred imperial soldiers sat in a line with their hands bound behind their backs. As they watched, a man stepped from the enemy ranks to the fore.

"My name is Beil Narmer Lichtein!" he roared. "And I come with a message!"

"What's this knave up to?" Tris muttered.

The man drew his curved sword from his belt, then planted his foot on an imperial soldier's shoulder, forcing his head low. One stroke of his wicked blade took it off. He kicked the body as blood spurted from its neck and turned, leering, to Liz.

"Hear me, sixth princess! Come quietly and these executions end! Persist in your resistance and they will continue until every last man lies headless!"

"Bastard!" Tris flushed crimson with anger. Liz only listened in silence. She seemed ready to burst into tears.

"I care not which you choose. Either way, you'll come to me in chains. From this day forth, you'll be my slave. But worry not, my sweet—I won't neglect you. I'll make you my plaything, every day and every night!"

The man set about lopping off imperial heads as disinterestedly as if he were filing paperwork. This was a show, one intended to break their spirits.

"I await your decision, Princess Celia Estrella!" he bellowed. His bloodstained sword gleamed as it caught the sun's light.

* * *

Hiro sat down on a large rock and stared at the ground. His mind swirled with frustration at his own impotence. Why had he been summoned here? Just to be a burden? All he had going for him was good eyesight—what good was that to Liz?

Why am I even here at all?

Liz had told him to flee back to Baum, but he couldn't summon the will to walk. Though she had long vanished from sight, she still occupied his thoughts. The memory of her sad smile flashed through his mind. If only she had asked him to stay. Even if it meant facing impossible odds, he still owed her a debt he had yet to repay.

But what if we did end up having to fight? I'd probably just freeze up...

Putting himself in danger was one thing, but forcing Liz to risk her own life defending him was another. He shook his head and looked up at the sky. The sun's harsh glare scoured the wasteland below. The wind was hot and sticky and clung unpleasantly to his skin, grating on his nerves.

So what now?

He heaved himself down from the rock and turned to gaze regretfully along the road behind him. She was down there, somewhere. Perhaps the fighting had begun already. What chance did she stand, leading fewer than a hundred men against three thousand? Then again, Liz was no ordinary girl. Even he could see that. He offered a short prayer to the Spirit King, asking him to see her safely to Margrave von Gurinda. Then it was time to go.

"Can't stay here all day," he said to himself. He closed his eyes for a moment, putting the past behind him once and for all. Then he made to stride away—and stopped dead.

What's that noise? Is someone coming?

It was the footsteps he heard first, the steady drumming of dozens upon dozens of feet. Next came the voices, carried on the wind. He hid in the shelter of the rock as men dressed in leather garb emerged from a cleft in the cliffs.

"You sure we're in the right place?" one asked.

"No doubt about it," another replied. "This here's the Baum side. Follow the cliffs south and we'll take the imperials from the rear. The sixth princess won't even know what hit her."

"Any villages around here? I could use some fun."

Someone scoffed. "Not now, idiot."

“What? We’re picking a fight with the sodding empire here. If I’m not getting a slave or three out of it, what’s the point?”

A great host of soldiers came out of the shadows of the cliff. Hiro couldn’t tell how many there were, but they were clearly men of Lichtein. Every one of them rippled with muscle, their brown chests exposed to the desert air. They swaggered along the road Hiro had come down as though it was theirs to tread.

“We can torch all the villages we like once we’ve grabbed the princess. Keep that in mind and do your jobs.”

“Heh. A real princess, eh? Wonder if His Highness would mind if I took a turn with her.”

“Mind? He’d cut your idiot head off your shoulders.”

“For a taste of a royal? Sounds cheap at the price!”

As the men roared with laughter, a surge of anger seized Hiro. Before he knew it, he had jumped out from behind the rock. At first a wave of alarm ran through the soldiers, but they lowered their guard again as soon as they got a better look at him. He was just one teenage boy with knocking knees. He was no threat to them, and they knew it.

“Who’s this brat?” said one.

“Bah, just a boy,” sighed another, the one who had been cracking crude jokes. “Pity. I thought I could have myself some fun.” His shoulders slumped, but then a thought seemed to strike him. He stared at Hiro, cupping his jaw. “Still, he’s got a pretty mug on him, and there’s always some who’ll pay for a little extra down below. Reckon he’s worth taking?”

“He’ll just get in our way,” said the first, the more serious of the two. “Let’s just kill him and be done with it. If he tells Baum we’re here, we’ll all pay for it.”

He drew the curved sword from his belt, but the crude one raised an arm to stop him.

“Not so fast,” he said. “I’ll do it.”

“Fine, but be quick about it.”

“Heh! I’ll stick ‘im faster than you lot’ve ever seen. Unless anyone’s game for

a wager?”

Shouts and laughter rose from the soldiers behind him. “A wager on what?!” “Just kill the boy. We need to move!” “Hurry up or His Highness’ll have your head!”

“All right, all right. I won’t be a minute.” The crude soldier seized Hiro by the shoulder. He stuck his spear into the ground, then drew out the curved sword at his side and pressed it against Hiro’s neck.

“Too scared to make a peep, eh?” he said. “Don’t worry, it’ll be over soon. With that scrawny neck of yours, you won’t feel a thing.” He drew his sword arm back for a wider swing, meaning to cut through Hiro’s neck in one stroke.

Hiro began to tremble. The soldier’s grin deepened. Clearly the man was expecting him to scream, but only a whisper escaped his lips.

“I’m sorry.”

“Sorry, kid. Too late for that.” The man gave Hiro one final reassuring pat on the shoulder, then swung with all his strength.

The blow never came. Confusion spread across the man’s face as he turned to gape at his arm—or rather, at where his arm used to be. Everything past his shoulder was missing.

“Eh? How did...? Eyaaaaaagh!”

He pressed his hand to the stump, trying to stem the flow, but it was no use. Blood poured through the gaps in his fingers. He fell to the ground and rolled about, screaming in agony. A dark figure looked down on him with ice-cold eyes: the very boy he had meant to slay.

The man’s severed arm dangled from Hiro’s grip. Blood dripped from its torn root to seep into the soil.

“Ah...”

A sound echoed from deep within Hiro’s core. The discordant note of something shattering.

“Now I see.”

Whatever it had been, it was gone now, never to be restored.

“Who I am. What I am.”

A pleasant clarity suffused his mind. He drew the soldier’s spear from where it lay planted in the earth—

“Die, you little shit!”

—and drove it through the chest of an enemy running at him. As that man fell, he plucked the sword from his belt—

“Take thi— Agk!”

—and used it to strike off the next soldier’s head. He could feel power coursing through his body, filling him up to the very tips of his fingers.

“Bugger me! Surround hi— Ghk!” Hiro cut another man down midsentence. He snatched the spear from his victim’s grasp and swept it in a wide horizontal arc. Three soldiers’ heads flew from their shoulders.

All the walls that had once restrained him now lay in ruins. He could feel his mind growing clearer, his limbs growing lighter, his senses growing sharper. His former self was returning. Twice, thrice he clenched his fingers, testing the new feel of his old body.

Not a word did he speak. His eyes were twin abysses, devoid of emotion, devoid of all but nothingness. And so the slaughter began—so very dark, and so very deep, and so very cold.

* * *

Where did I go wrong? What did I do to deserve this?

Over and over again, the man asked himself the same questions. Where scant moments ago he had felt on top of the world, now he knew only despair. The enemy was hot on his heels, and it was all he could do to keep running.

His name was Caleris, and he served in the ducal army as an advisor to Beil Narmer Lichtein. This year, he would be thirty-four. Though he had once worn a slave’s chains, by devoting himself to the pursuit of learning and cultivating his talents, he had eventually won his freedom. It had taken many years, but at last, he was living the life he had always dreamed of—or at least, he had been

until he'd had the sheer misfortune to stumble across that *thing*.

Now his comrades were gone. All five hundred of them—*five hundred! How did he kill five hundred?!*—cut down by a single swordsman upon whom none of them had landed a single blow. Either this was a nightmare or they were facing some manner of spirit. No mortal man could have done such a thing.

Wait...what if that really was a spirit?

Caleris slowed to a stop as the thought developed. He hid among the rocks while he caught his breath. His commander would surely want to hear of this. He ought to report back once the danger had passed. Keeping a watchful eye on his surroundings all the while, he slowed his breathing and tried to organize his thoughts.

A spirit. That's it. He must have been some kind of a spirit. Nothing else could have done that to Dagnar.

He shuddered to remember it. A strange boy had appeared out of nowhere to obstruct their march, torn Dagnar's arm clean off when the man went to cut him down, then unleashed indescribable carnage. All who stood and fought, he slaughtered. All who fled, he ran down and beheaded. Worst of all, as he cut down men left and right, his face had betrayed not a single shred of emotion. The memory of his empty eyes made Caleris tremble with fear even now.

Why is this happening? This mission was supposed to be simple! Flank the princess! That's all we had to do!

His teeth were chattering, though it was hardly cold. He hurriedly pressed his hand over his mouth. If he made the slightest sound, the boy would find him.

Somewhere, a stone clattered underfoot. Caleris squeezed his eyes shut as a humid wind brushed his cheek. He felt ready to go mad with fear.

I don't want to die, I don't want to die, I don't want to die, I don't want to die...

But the despair that dogged his heels was not so kind.

"I'll give you two choices," a voice said. "Die by your own hand or by mine."

Caleris squealed in terror. "Mercy, I beg you! Whatever I did, I'll never do it

again, I swear! Just let me go!”

The boy looked down on Caleris, who was grinding his head into the dirt, with dead eyes.

“I’m on my hands and knees here! What did I ever do to you? Nothing, that’s what! You’ve already killed all my friends! What more could you want— Agh!” Caleris gave a choked scream as the boy picked him up by the throat. Feeling the inhuman strength in those slender arms, his spirit broke entirely.

“I’m telling you, I’ve done nothing! Don’t kill me! I don’t want to die!”

“True enough. You have done nothing...yet. But you may, if I let you go. That is the crime for which I sentence you. In showing you mercy, I might bring misfortune upon the innocent, and that I could not bear.”

Caleris’s eyes bulged. “You’d kill me just for that? For what I *might* do?! Who do you think you are, a god?!”

“Right now, I might very well be.”

“Wha—?!”

Blood burst from Caleris’s mouth as a shining blade slashed across his chest. As his world grew dark, a story he had heard long ago passed through his mind. An old tale, the kind parents all across Soleil told their children at bedtime.

Go to sleep before nightfall, like good little children...

...or the Desperation will snatch you away, and you’ll never be heard from again.

* * *

From the waist up, he was naked, exposing his muscle-bound physique to the air. The rest of his body was draped in expensive silks laced with silver and gold. His skin was the same olive brown as the rest of his men, but there the similarities ended. He stood stronger and taller than any of them and exuded an aura of authority none could match. His name was Beil Narmer Lichtein, third son of the duke of Lichtein and the commander of the ducal army’s advance force. He narrowed his eyes at the crimson-haired princess huddled in the cleft in the cliffs where she had made her stand.

“Stubborn little thing, isn’t she?” he said. “I like that in a woman.”

Behind him, two hundred imperial soldiers knelt on the ground in a row. He slashed off several of their heads, then turned to his men. “That’s about enough. Kill the rest, then bring me the big one.”

The imperial soldiers were powerless to defend themselves as the ducal men ran them through, tore out their throats, lopped off their limbs. Soon there were none left alive, only a line of corpses relinquishing their lifeblood to the parched soil. As they bled dry, Beil’s subordinates dragged another prisoner before him: a man with a large scar on his cheek.

“Dios?!” The princess’s horrified scream was audible even from this distance.

Beil’s expression twisted into an ecstatic grin. He burst into laughter. “Good, good! So she speaks at last! And what lovely cries you raise, my sweet!”

Dios ground his teeth in rage. Beil planted a foot on his head. “Oh, you didn’t like that, did you?” he jeered. “She means something to you, hm? What are you? Her advisor? Her bodyguard?”

He was formidable, this one, far more so than the other imperial soldiers. That much he had shown during the fighting at Fort Alt. Beil had taken great pains to capture him alive, hoping to put his bullish bulk to use as a slave. These past few days truly had been one stroke of fortune after another.

“How does it feel to know that when I finally get her in my clutches, it’ll be because of you? Well, not to worry. I’ll treat you to a good view!”

Beil kicked Dios across the face, prompting a grunt of pain, then raised his voice to address the princess. “If you want your man back in one piece, lay down your weapons and come quietly!”

She was too far away to make out her expression, but judging by the soldiers struggling to hold her back, he seemed to have touched a nerve. She only needed one more push. So thinking, Beil brought his sword down on Dios’s shoulder.

Dios cried out in shock and confusion. His severed arm flew high into the air, tumbling end over end to smack into the dirt. He gritted his teeth and managed to bear the pain, but there was no escaping the loss of a limb. His consciousness

hung by a thread.

Seeing the blood spurt from Dios's shoulder, Beil turned to one of his men. "Stop his bleeding!"

"Sir!" The man produced a strip of cloth and bound it tight around the open wound.

Beil spat the severed arm on the tip of his sword and hurled it across the gap between the armies. It thumped to the ground at the crimson-haired girl's feet.

"Do you see that, Sixth Princess? Best not wait too long or your man will die!"

He burst into laughter. *What now, you fools?* he thought. *Charge to your deaths. Lay down your weapons. I care not what you do, so long as you do something.*

In his mind's eye, he could already picture the princess crying and screaming. Just the thought filled him with indescribable pleasure. He would torment her, violate her, debase her, and parade her whimpering ruin all around the empire. The very idea made him laugh so hard, he thought his mouth might split—but in the end, his joy proved short-lived.

"Hear me, Lady Celia Estrella Elizabeth von Grantz!" Dios shouted.

"Eh?" Beil looked down at him, puzzled.

"Leave me here and fight on! Though my body may die, my soul will forever be with the Grantzian Empire, and with you! You once spoke to me of a noble dream! I would see that dream fulfilled!"

Beil's eyes narrowed. "What are you babbling about?"

"If I must give my life in exchange, I will go to the Twelve Divines with my head held high!"

"Shut your bastard mouth!" Beil kicked Dios across the face once more, but Dios didn't so much as flinch. He fixed Beil with a glare so piercing that the man backed away in fear, then spat out a goblet of blood and continued.

"Yours is an unforgiving road, my lady, and many are the hardships you must face along the way! But I beg you, walk it even so! Though it should be strewn

with corpses, see it to its end! Forge a path of conquest you might truly call your own!”

“Enough!” Beil planted a kick in Dios’s armless shoulder. Dios gasped in pain and fell to the ground. Beil glared down at him for a moment with fury in his eyes, before turning his attention back to the sixth princess. He was just in time to see her retreating behind her shield wall.

“Get back here!” he bellowed. “Do you care nothing for this man’s life?!” He seized Dios by the hair and wrenched his head upright, but to no avail. The princess’s distant figure disappeared amid the shadows of the cliffs.

Dios gave a pained chuckle. “Seems your plan’s failed. If you mean to kill me, then kill me, but you’ll make no slave of my lady. Not this day nor any other.”

Beil scowled. “Very well. I’ll take her by force, then—and take her I will, mark my words, until she’s thoroughly defiled.” He smashed Dios’s face into the dirt again, then brought a foot down hard on the back of his head. Over and over he stamped, without mercy, until his rage was spent and Dios spoke no more.

“Hmph,” he grunted. “Find yourself a good seat in the afterlife. Once I’ve got my hands on your precious princess, I’ll put on a show just for you.” He sawed the head from Dios’s lifeless body and tossed it at one of his soldiers’ feet. “Take that and raise it high. Make sure they can see it.”

Beil spared the severed head not another glance as he raised his bloodstained sword and bellowed across the battlefield:

“Charge!”

* * *

“The bastards think they have us! Make them think twice! Protect Her Highness with your lives!”

Tris’s voice echoed through the narrow confines of the canyon. The heavies beat their swords against their shields as they braced for the charge. Behind them, the archers fired at will, picking off enemies by the dozen. Farther back yet was Liz. With her eyes downcast and her eyelids swollen and puffy, she made for a pitiable sight. She bore no trace of her usual vibrancy.

Hiro...

His gentle face solidified in the back of her mind. Though even now he didn't know it, he had been her rock: this mysterious boy who had shared her journey though he had been lost himself, this kind soul who had stayed by her side without a word of complaint. When he had asked to fight alongside her, she could have hugged him for joy.

I wish I could have told you how sorry I was.

Her fight was gone. After seeing so much death, she could stomach no more. Only a handful of her men had survived the journey thus far, and they too would lie cold on the ground before the hour was done.

You know, Hiro...I'm just so tired of it all.

She hugged her knees and buried her head in her thighs, shutting out the rest of the world. With no more tears left to cry, she closed her eyes and sank into a sleep-like fugue. As she fell deeper into darkness, the clamor of battle receded until it hardly seemed real at all.

And so she was the only one not to see the battle turn.

As the glaring sunlight beat down upon the wasteland and the desert sands churned with sweat and blood, a mote of darkness plunged into the fray like a droplet of long-awaited rain. The two sides withdrew as it alighted on the earth. All across the battlefield, men paused in their fighting and regarded it warily.

It stood up, revealing itself to be a teenage boy. His hair danced in the wind, dark and lustrous as obsidian. His eyes were black and clear, and they gleamed with a cold rationality. He regarded the enemy in silence, dressed from head to toe in garb like darkness incarnate.

He swung his glittering sword in a lazy arc. A gentle breeze rolled through the enemy ranks. For a moment, nothing seemed amiss, and then a handful of soldiers collapsed in plumes of gore. In a matter of seconds, the same scene played out across the entire battlefield. As far as the eye could see, ducal soldiers stood showered in their comrades' blood, blinking in confusion as they

struggled to process what had happened. Even the sight of their friends' bodies seemed to evince no understanding. Their minds had gone numb with shock, leaving them unable to comprehend where the blood had come from or what had occurred.

Time seemed to have stopped, and yet there was one exception. The boy strolled forward into the enemy lines. Without so much as a glance, he lashed out sideways. A ducal soldier's head flew, its jaw still hanging slack from its stupefied face. He twisted his torso around, claiming two more heads with his gleaming blade. Before the blood had even begun to spray from their severed necks, he took a step forward and killed another man, then yet another step and cut down three.

Passing his sword to his left hand, he picked up a fallen spear from the ground and hurled it. The shaft skewered four men's heads like so many apples. Even as they fell, he drove his sword into a stunned soldier's throat with his left hand, then sliced the head from the man next to him with a stroke like a lover's caress.

That much death would shock anyone back to their senses. A great roar rose from the enemy soldiers as they regained their wits. The sheer force of their battle cry seemed enough to send him flying.

"What *are* you, you monster?!"

"Yah!"

His shining blade sliced through the air to bisect an attacking soldier's torso. The two pieces fell to the ground with a sickening squelch.

"Raaaaaagh!"

"Hah!"

He ducked inside the reach of a lunging spear and rammed his blade through its owner's chest. Yanking it out, he mowed down two more soldiers with the backswing, then launched himself high into the air. A volley of spears thudded into the dirt where he had been standing not a moment before.

His somersault brought him down amid a dense knot of enemies. Two strokes, three, and he carved a cross in midair. White lines glimmered in the

space around him. His enemies died where they stood before they even had the chance to feel pain. How easily he cut them down, with the cold indifference of a child crushing ants.

Tris watched, dumbstruck, as the battle pitched wildly in their favor. He was far from the only one. Even the imperial soldiers were keeping a wary eye on the boy, making sure not to lose sight of him.

A surreal atmosphere hung over the battlefield. The living darkness eroded the enemy ranks like water seeping through cloth. Its assault had the ducal army's vanguard in tatters. Regrouping and recovering would be a hopeless endeavor in their current state. Besides, every soldier on the front line wore a mask of sheer terror. If not for the momentum of their allies behind them, forcing them to maintain their charge, they would have broken and run—but as it was, they could only plunge helplessly into the maw of darkness.

"It can't be! Is that the whelp?" Tris stared in disbelief. Even from this distance, the figure now carving a swathe through the enemy lines bore no resemblance to the timid child he remembered. It was as though the boy were possessed by some malevolent force. "And what's that sword he's wielding?"

No matter how many men the gleaming blade slaughtered, no blood ever dulled its brilliance. It shone as brightly as ever, fierce and beautiful and silver.

Though Tris did not—could not—have known, there was once a time when that blade was renowned as the sword of a hero. As the weapon of a king who saved his nation from ruin and brought the surrounding lands to heel. A thousand years of history had turned it to myth; even its name lay buried beneath the sands of time, leaving only the legend of a sword long lost. Yet in the legend of Held Rey Schwartz von Grantz, second emperor of the Grantzian Empire, it was written:

To the king blessed with twinned black, commander of all creation, there came a mighty sword, and it knew no defeat, bringing only victory assured.

None remained alive to remember those days, but if they had, the sword would have struck them with awe. Its hilt and crossguard seemed dusted with powder snow, so pure and unblemished was their shine; its blade trailed a thousand dazzling stars as its razor edge parted the air. Set against the

twinblack boy and his dark garb, it seemed a heavenly canopy on a backdrop of deepest night.

It was the last and most beautiful of the Spiritblade Sovereigns, made manifest once more in this world:

The Heavenly Sovereign, Excalibur.



“Well, I’ll be...” one of the heavies whispered. “They’re retreating!”

The massacre had been unfolding in stunned silence, but now movement rippled across the battlefield. Word of events must finally have reached the enemy commander. The Lichtein army’s front line ponderously retracted, skirting Hiro as it went. The boy watched them go for a while, then turned away, seemingly no longer interested.

Tris’s face stiffened in sudden urgency. “Whelp! Behind you!” he shouted. A cloud of arrows rose from the retreating army, but Hiro didn’t seem to have heard. Even if he had, without a shield, what chance did he have of defending himself? It was over. Tris shut his eyes.

When next he opened them, he could not tell whether or not he was dreaming. Hiro stood amid a forest of arrows, but they parted like a stream around him, leaving him unharmed. As Tris stared, mouth agape, the boy’s eye caught his gaze.

“Uranos... Well, that explains it.” As Tris breathed a sigh of relief, Hiro launched into a sprint. “What’s he playing at?”

Tris peered at him warily, and with good reason: the boy was approaching the imperial lines at full speed. His face was no longer the emotionless abyss of before. He seemed once more like the fainthearted boy he had been when they first met.

“Tris!” he shouted. “You’re all right!”

“What are you— Whoa!” Tris’s voice cut off as Hiro flung his arms around him. For a moment, he didn’t know how to react, but then folded his arms around the boy’s shoulders.

“What about Liz? Where is she? She isn’t hurt, is she?”

“Now just— One thing at a time!” Tris spluttered. “I’ve sent Her Highness to the rear to regain her strength. More importantly, how do you fare?” That was perhaps a pointless question, with Hiro in such obvious good cheer, but it only felt right to ask.

Hiro looked himself over. “Fine, I think? Anyway, I’m going to see Liz. I won’t

be a minute!”

“Now? No, she’s not—” Tris reached out to stop him, but the boy had already vanished into the depths of the canyon.

The stench of death hung thick and muggy between the cliff walls. Hiro unconsciously scrunched his nose. Just how many men had died here? He made his way deeper, taking care not to tread on any bodies.

“Liz! There you—” He spotted her and flashed her a smile but quickly sobered up as he took in the whole picture. She sat on top of a boulder, huddled into herself, surrounded by corpses. His chest tightened at the sight. She seemed so fragile that she could shatter at any moment.

Hiro hefted himself up alongside her, but she said nothing. Cerberus watched him at her side. He patted the wolf on the head, then placed a hand on Liz’s shoulder.

“Liz...”

She was dead to the world. She didn’t even seem to recognize his touch.

“Liz!”

He grabbed her by the shoulders and shook. At last she raised her head, though she still remained silent. Hiro swallowed hard at the sight of her face. Her eyes stared unfocused into empty space, devoid of their vital spark. Her eyelids were swollen, red, and tender.

Oh, Liz...who hurt you like this?

Hiro gently brought an arm around her head and pulled her close. Faced with such utter exhaustion, he couldn’t find any words that seemed right.

“I’m so sorry,” he whispered into her crimson hair. He didn’t even know what he was apologizing for: not being able to think of anything to say or arriving too late to help.

A shudder of life ran through Liz’s fingers. She gripped his arms and lifted her face from his chest.

“Hiro?”

“Yeah.” He nodded, flashing a guilty smile. “I know you’ll probably be mad, but...I’m back.”

Liz reached out to touch his cheek. The air here was thick and humid as a midsummer day, but her fingertips were cold enough to make him shiver.

“Why are you here?” she asked.

“I figured out what I can do to help.” He took Liz’s hand and gently held it in his own, heating her with his warmth. The light returned to her eyes as it struck home that this was really him, but then a wave of sadness overcame her and she lowered her gaze.

“Dios is dead,” she said.

“I see.”

“He was like a brother to me, you know? More than my real brothers ever were.”

“Yeah.”

“But when it really mattered, I couldn’t do anything to help him.”

Hiro said nothing, letting her continue.

“He told me to...to make my dream real.” Her voice cracked as tears welled in her eyes. “I... I don’t...”

She wailed and buried her face in Hiro’s chest, where she began to cry short, panting sobs. Hiro wrapped his arms around her and drew her close. A wielder of a Spiritblade she might be, but beneath all that, she was still just a girl of fifteen. To have to watch someone you called family cut down before your eyes would tear anyone’s heart in two.

You know, she really does take after you.

Her hair was a different hue, her features were nothing like his, but her soul burned with the same flame. Both had had the burden of authority thrust upon them at a young age, yet found their lofty positions only stifled their ambitions and left them powerless to save their nation from ruin.

Is that why you called me back?

As he stroked Liz's head, he felt he finally understood why he had been brought back to this world. Perhaps he was mistaken. He probably was. Even so, it was as good a reason as any.

Tris and the heavies watched on in anguish as their princess silently wept atop the rock. Even the burliest man present shed tears through clenched teeth. Tris alone refused to cry, but he trembled with rage. A trickle of blood oozed from the corner of his mouth.

Dios von Mikhail would have been twenty-eight years of age this year. He had once made his living working as a mercenary before taking a grievous wound and ending up abandoned in the empire. Tris had been the one to take him in and nurse him back to health. Not once had Dios neglected his training, and over time he had won countless feats of valor on the battlefield. The day his prowess had been rewarded with a position as the sixth princess's aide was one of the proudest of Tris's life. If Liz was the old soldier's daughter, then Dios was surely his son.

Tris thumped his hand against his chest, consigning his memories to the past. His gauntlet clanged against his breastplate, breaking the silence. He sank to one knee.

"Princess Celia Estrella Elizabeth von Grantz!" he shouted. All eyes turned to him as his voice echoed through the canyon. "Now is not the time to mourn! That is not what Dios would want! Soon the sun will set! We must think of a way to break through their lines!"

It was not Liz who answered, however, but Hiro.

"Leave that to me," he said. "I have a plan."

Tris looked taken aback. "What?"

"The enemy forces number around two thousand. Even if we somehow escaped them, they'd only fall on the surrounding settlements in retaliation. I doubt Liz would want innocent people to suffer on her account."

"Hiro?" Liz looked up at him in confusion, and small wonder: for all she knew, he was still just an ordinary boy.

Hiro smiled awkwardly and continued. "We don't have to wipe them out, but

unless we thin their numbers, we'll be left with a bandit epidemic."

Tris frowned. "We've twenty men left, if that. What would you have us do against two thousand? Is each of us to slay a hundred men?"

"Nothing like that. Especially given the state you're in." Hiro's smile widened as he hopped down from the rock. He raised an index finger. "Why, it's so simple, even a child could think of it."

And so the man once known and feared as Mars was reborn.

* * *

The Lichtein encampment lay two sel from the cliffs, a cluster of several hundred tents ringed by a palisade. A notably luxurious tent sat in the center. Inside it, advisors and officers lined up in two parallel columns. Beil Lichtein sat in a large chair at their head, scowling as he listened to the report of their losses.

"...six officers, and eight hundred and twelve infantry, with two hundred and nineteen more wounded. That's all, sir." The chief strategist concluded his report and returned to his place in line.

Not only had the five hundred soldiers he'd dispatched to circle around the enemy's rear been wiped out, but the sixth princess herself had put up unexpectedly fierce resistance. He had lost a lot of good men that day.

"Do you mean to say we lost a thousand men to fewer than a hundred?!" Beil dashed his wine glass against the ground, sending shards of glass flying in all directions. "Is this what you would have me tell my brother?! That I let the princess slip through my fingers and frittered away a thousand men in the process?!"

The chief strategist came forward once more. "There were extenuating circumstances, Your Highness. Surely you witnessed them for yourself. What attacked us was no human, of that I'm certain!"

This man in black was a menace, it was true. No sooner had he descended on the battlefield than he had carved through their ranks in the blink of an eye. Even so, that was no excuse for failure.

“Bah!” Beil scoffed. “So I must instead report that I lost a thousand soldiers to a single man? My brother would have my head!” He kicked his chair in an explosion of rage. It collided with the desk and smashed to splinters with a discordant crash. Still not placated, he seized one of his officers by the lapels.

“He was strong, that much I’ll grant, but who gave him the run of the battlefield? You! You and all the other imbeciles I dared to hope could lead my troops!”

“We had no choice, sir!” the officer protested. “After what he did to us, the men were terrified!”

“And you call yourselves soldiers of Lichtein?! Pathetic!” Beil thrust the man away and glared at the rest in turn. “We attack with the dawn, every last man. There will be no retreat. If any of you object, step forward now and I’ll end your concerns.”

This was supposed to have been an easy assignment. By all rights, the fighting should have been over hours ago. They had seen no need to prepare for a night battle, so now that darkness had fallen, they were left sitting on their hands while the enemy enjoyed a much-needed reprieve.

“None of you? Good. Then this meeting is over. Find replacements for the dead officers, then get to work. I want every last one of you plotting through the night. Anyone stupid or incompetent enough to disappoint me will spend the rest of their lives in chains.”

His subordinates fell to one knee, clapping their right hands to their left shoulders. “As you command!” they intoned as one.

At that moment, a panicked messenger tumbled into the tent. “We’re under attack!” he cried. “Enemy numbers unknown! The camp is under attack!”

Confusion spread across every face, and for good reason. The enemy was on the brink of annihilation. The idea that they would launch an attack themselves was unthinkable.

Even Beil doubted his own ears. “What did you say?” he demanded.

“I repeat, the camp is under attack! Enemy numbers unknown!”

“Preposterous! There are barely a handful of them left!”

Beil stormed out of the tent in a flurry of silks, followed in short order by his advisors and officers. Yells, screams, and thundering hoofbeats filled the air outside as hysteria spread through the resting soldiers.

“What is the meaning of this?!” he bellowed. “Surely they can’t have reinforcements!”

The princess had no cavalry left, only infantry and archers. If there were hoofbeats in the air, they could only signal the arrival of a new force, but that wasn’t possible...or at least, it shouldn’t have been.

“It can’t be... Has my brother fallen?” For a moment, the thought crossed Beil’s mind, but he immediately dismissed it. “No. He would never.”

The ducal army’s main force of twelve thousand was currently assaulting Berg Fortress. So long as they held, no enemy reinforcements could reach them here.

“This Athena has a formidable reputation, but even so...”

Beil and his men were an advance force dispatched to capture the princess, having arrived two days ago. Even the illustrious Warmaiden would be hard-pressed to break through twelve thousand men. But then, if enemy reinforcements were out of the question, what was going on?

As Beil looked around in confusion, an advisor at his side took charge. “Return to your regiments!” he commanded the officers. “Assemble back here once you have restored order!”

“At once!” they replied. They turned to leave—and then, as one, toppled to the ground. A young boy stepped over their corpses with a battered spear in hand.

“That was lucky,” he said, heaving a mock sigh. “If you hadn’t thought to call a strategy meeting, this would have been much harder.”

One of Beil’s advisors fell on his rear with a squeal. The boy cast aside his spear, picked up a sword from one of the officers’ bodies, and began to inspect it. “Hm. Well-maintained,” he said. “The sword of a dutiful man.” With a smooth sideways stroke, he lopped the head from the fallen advisor.

Every man present had witnessed the havoc this black-garbed boy had wreaked on the battlefield. Now that he was in their midst, the fear he had sown in their hearts began to take root. The advisors and captains alike backed away in terror.

“I’m afraid I can’t let you get away,” the boy said. “Not when it might invite misfortune on the innocent.”

He held his sword horizontally and threw it. With a crunch of bone, it caught an advisor between his tear-filled eyes. Blood sprayed from his shattered forehead. The rest of the men screamed and ran—

“I told you, I can’t let you get away.”

—but only so far as the boy let them. They died with prayers for salvation on their lips.

At last, only Beil was left. “Curse you!” he cried, fleeing into the tent.

The boy picked up a curved sword and followed. As he entered the tent, Beil turned around to reveal a sword studded with gemstones. His grin deepened. “Heh. I don’t know who or what you are, but this’ll cut you down like a babe at the teat!”

“A spirit weapon?” The boy shrugged. “Well, then.”

He brought his sword down on the nearby wreckage of Beil’s chair. Over and over he slashed at the wood, until the curved blade was chipped and dented.

“What are you doing?” Beil’s brow knotted in confusion.

When finally the boy turned back to him, he held not so much a sword as a rod of beaten metal. “Have you ever heard it said that our capacity for cruelty comes from our capacity for reason?” he said. “My brother’s words, not mine, but I always thought they rang strangely true.”

“What’s this prattle?”

“I’m going to ask you some questions now. I want you to answer me honestly.”

“Have you lost your mind?!” Beil was growing exasperated. The boy barely even seemed to be listening to him.

“Normally, I’d start with your fingers, but I’m short on time. I suppose your arm will do.”

The boy disappeared from Beil’s field of view, and then suddenly the abyss was right before Beil’s eyes, staring deep into his soul. The next moment, his arm exploded with pain. He looked down to see the boy’s battered sword sunk deep into his bicep, its uneven blade digging into his flesh like the teeth of a saw.

“Gaaaaaah!!!”

“First question. Was it you who killed Dios?”

Beil grunted as a kick to the face sent him flying.

“Someone, help...please... I need to stop the bleeding...” He let his spirit weapon fall and clutched at his arm, writhing in agony.

“I’ll do your ankle next. Try not to die before you give me some answers.”

Beil looked up to find himself gazing into the void. What stood over him now was something mechanical, something dead, lacking even a shred of emotion. He found himself wondering if it was even human at all.

A strange delirium had come over all of the soldiers who had fought on the front lines. They had all repeated the same thing, over and over in a fervent whisper: “The Desperation.”

Overcome by despair, Beil ground his head into the dirt. “I yield! You’ve won! I beg you, cease this!”

“Why should I?”

“You’d be violating the binational accord! There are rules for treating prisoners of war! Excessive mistreatment or killing of captured soldiers is prohibited.”

The black-haired boy cut Beil off mid-explanation. “Those don’t apply to me, I’m afraid. I’m not an imperial soldier.”

Beil struggled to understand. “You’re not...? What?”

“I still haven’t gotten an answer, and we’re running out of time. Perhaps you’ll

be more willing to talk without a foot.” The boy’s voice was detached as he approached.

“Gah!” Beil cried as the blade sank into his leg.

The boy leaned forward, his breath as cold as ice. “Now, let’s try this again. *Was it you who killed Dios?*”

Hiro left the tent to find that the sky to the east was beginning to lighten. Out in the darkness of the wasteland, he could perhaps have made out his feet if he squinted. Here in the Lichtein encampment, however, the illumination was so overpowering that there was no such need.

The place was barely recognizable. All the tents had been torn open, tipped over, consumed by fire. Burning bodies littered the ground, poisoning the air with an acrid stench. Riderless horses ran free beyond the palisade. Hiro stood in the middle of the camp, a black-haired figure gazing at the gutted remains of the central tent amid a vision of hell.

“Hiro!” A crimson-haired girl rushed up to him and patted him up and down, checking him for injuries. “You’re not hurt, are you? Are you sore anywhere?”

He blushed as her inquisitive hands reached his face. “I’m fine. See? Not a scratch on me.” He raised his arms and twisted left, then right, showing her he was unharmed.

Liz’s eyes softened and she sighed with relief. “Thank goodness! Whatever were you thinking, running in here alone?!”

Her hand flew out with inhuman speed to smooch his cheeks in a vice.

“Bhut it wash the obly whay!”

“I want an apology, not whatever that was!”

His jaw was starting to creak in her grip. He couldn’t exactly explain himself like this. He couldn’t even apologize.

“Promise me you’ll not go running off into any more enemy camps. I can fight with you, you know!”

Hiro nodded desperately. “Yesh.”

With that, Liz finally released her hand. As Hiro massaged his stinging cheeks, a light bulb went on in Liz's eyes. "Oh, that's right!" she said. "What was that sword all about?"

Hiro still had Excalibur tied to his belt. Liz crouched down and looked it over with appraising eyes.

"Whoa..." she breathed. "It looks gorgeous up close. Lævateinn's like a sweet little girl, but you're a proper noble lady."

She unsheathed Lævateinn and held them together, comparing. Sweat beaded on Hiro's forehead. This was going to be difficult to explain. Impossible, actually. The sword of a legendary hero, supposedly lost for a thousand years, had turned up in his hand. What could he say that would make any sense? *Screw it*, he thought, and decided to lie.

"After we split up, I... I found it. By the side of the road."

"You found *this* by the roadside? Just lying there?" Liz asked.

"Um...yeah! I thought it looked pretty, so I took it."

"Really? Wow...I bet that doesn't happen every day. Maybe it's because Baum's so close by?"

"Ha ha, yeah, maybe!"

It was an obvious lie, but she bought it all the same. Maybe she was too quick to trust, or maybe she was just an airhead. Either way, Hiro was thankful.

"Hmm..." Liz murmured to herself. "I can sense a powerful spirit in there. It's no ordinary sword, that's for certain. No, wait... Could the Spirit King's power be bolstering it somehow? But then..." She seemed to be genuinely deep in thought.

Hiro felt a little guilty—not to mention uncertain where to look. The front of her armor did a poor job of hiding her chest when she was bending over like that, and it was getting harder and harder to ignore. Out of the frying pan and into the fire, one might call it. Her shifting from side to side to inspect Excalibur from different angles made even her modest chest sway noticeably. Her shapely figure and the sweat beading on her pale skin only inflamed his

excitement. If this kept up, he was going to say something ill-advised.

Unable to take any more, Hiro cut Liz out of his view entirely. Only then did he notice the hulking figure looming behind her back.

“Having yourself a good long look, are you, whelp?”

With his bulging muscles, Tris looked like a bear on horseback. A sword glinted in his hand. It was trembling, most likely with barely restrained bloodlust. Hiro’s desire instantly cooled. “I-It’s not what you think!” he stammered.

“Oh, isn’t it now? Coercing Her Highness into such a shameful pose—I should take your head, you lecher!”

“I’m not coercing anyone into anything!”

“Silence! You’ve had designs on Her Highness’s virtue from the start, I’ll wager. Well, no longer!”

“Now, hold on!” Hiro protested. “Let’s not jump to conclusions! Just hear me out!”

Liz straightened up and turned to Tris. “Could you two lovebirds do this some other time? I want to know how the battle went.”

Tris’s face froze. “Lovebirds? Your Highness, I assure you—”

“We’re standing in the middle of the enemy camp. Give me a report.”

Tris ground his teeth. “Bah. Well, as you can see, we dealt them a crushing defeat. Thanks to the whelp, much as it galls me to admit it.”

The first thing Hiro had instructed them to do was round up their old horses. Naturally, some were long gone, but they had managed to recapture around sixty, which they divided into three groups of twenty. With these, they launched an attack on the Lichtein camp from three sides.

Only the foremost few horses in each group bore soldiers. The rest went riderless, and indeed many peeled off and ran wild along the way. Their charge would have made a pitiful sight in the light of day. In the dead of night, however, it wreaked havoc. With their true numbers hidden under the cover of darkness, the thundering of hooves across the silent wasteland made their

small force seem a mighty army.

The enemy had already been rattled by the battle earlier that day, and the night attack had hit them when they were least equipped to think clearly. Few soldiers would have been willing to contend with shod hooves powerful enough to shatter skulls.

“Between that and them killing each other, I daresay few got away,” Tris continued.

Additionally, Hiro had instructed a small number of infantrymen to dress as enemy soldiers, sneak into the camp during the mayhem, and attack. With their superiors attending Beil’s strategy meeting, the rank and file had quickly plunged into confusion. No one wants to die—human beings will do anything to survive—so once the seeds of suspicion had been sown, the men quickly fell upon each other. Meanwhile, Hiro had assaulted the main tent, ensuring the officers could not restore order to the chaos.

Liz nodded as Tris concluded. “Good work, but we have to stay vigilant. There might still be stragglers lurking nearby. Sweep the area, then gather the men here once you’re done.”

“At once, Your Highness.” Tris clapped a hand to his chest, then turned his horse about and rode away through the burned-out camp. Liz watched until he was out of sight, then turned to Hiro.

“And what about you?” she asked.

Hiro said nothing, but jerked a thumb at the pile of ashes that had once been the central tent.

“Is he dead?” Liz asked hesitantly.

“Yeah.”

“I see.”

They stood in silence for a while before Liz spoke again, her expression clouded. “You know, I don’t really know how to feel. There’s a part of me that’s glad he paid for what he did, and another part of me that just feels numb, and I’m not sure I know what to do with either of them.”

“You’ll figure it out someday,” Hiro said. *As I did*, he silently added.

For better or for worse, she was pure of heart—too pure, perhaps. Someday, that would lead to tragedy. If she had been in his place, she would have accepted Beil’s surrender. The title of Sixth Princess was a great weight, and she had grown used to suppressing her emotions in order to bear it.

That was only what he thought was going on inside her head, of course. He could not know for certain. To justify his actions with convenient assumptions about another person’s heart was perhaps the height of arrogance. Even so, he would not take back his attack on Beil’s tent, even if he could.

The seeds of misfortune are best plucked before they can take root.

As a glimmer of dazzling sunlight broke the horizon to the east, a great *crack* split the melancholy air. Hiro’s eyes grew wide as he saw the cause: the crimson-haired girl had just smacked her cheeks with both palms.

“All right! That’s quite enough moping for one morning,” she announced. Gone were the pain and the sorrow that had weighed so heavily on her brow. Her face was as bright as the new day.

“Come on, Hiro. Let’s go and see my uncle!”

Here was a crimson flower blooming in the wasteland, nobler and more beautiful than any precious stone.

I should never have worried, Hiro thought with a wry smile. *She has your blood in her veins, after all.*

“But first, I owe you a thank-you,” Liz said.

Hiro grew alarmed as she suddenly leaned closer. “Huh? What are you—”

“You’re the reason I’m still here. I won’t forget that, not as long as I live.”

Something soft and warm brushed his cheek. By the time he realized what it was, she had already pulled away.

“We’re in this together now, all right?”

Hiro gave a flustered little laugh. “All right.”

Truly, a smile suits you better.



Chapter 4: The Warmaiden

The twenty-eighth day of the fifth month of Imperial Year 1023, two days after the battle in the nameless wasteland

Liz's company was eight sel from the border city of Linkus and closing. They had begun their journey with over three hundred soldiers. Now, after a series of monster attacks and their clash with Lichtein, they numbered fewer than ten. Despite their losses, Liz rode onward. Hiro, with his arms wrapped around her waist, had no choice but to follow.

"Once we reach Berg Fortress, I'll have to teach you to ride," Liz said.

"Um...that might be harder than you think."

He'd had much the same conversation a thousand years ago. Emperor Artheus had taken it upon himself to instruct him in riding day and night, but while mounting up had been easy enough, his horses had all refused to move an inch once he was on their backs. He had always used a carriage in battle, so his inability to ride had never been an inconvenience. Now, however, perhaps it was time to look into addressing that. There were two reasons it had become a pressing issue: one, Tris's glare was growing more murderous by the second, and two, the rising and falling of the horse's gait was pressing Liz's breasts into his hands.

The latter was a particular concern. A thousand years ago, he had ridden behind Artheus who, for obvious reasons, had given him no such trouble. Now that he was riding with a woman, however, things were different. Modest her chest may be, but for now, she was a world-renowned beauty in the making.

Are all girls' chests this soft, or is it just because she's a princess?

Hiro's thoughts were starting to take a turn for the idiotic when Tris, Liz's ever-watchful guardian, pulled up beside them on his horse. He shot Hiro his now customary glare, then turned to Liz. "We ought to take a rest before long, Your Highness."

“Agreed,” Liz replied. “We don’t know what state Linkus is in, and Cerberus is getting tired. The horses could use a break too.”

Cerberus bounded alongside them, her tongue lolling dolefully from her mouth.

“I’ll send two men ahead to scout out the town,” Liz continued. “We’re not so pressed for time that we can’t afford to wait.”

If all had gone to plan, they would have been arriving at Berg Fortress by then, but after everything that had happened on their journey, there was no such thing as being too cautious.

“We’ll stop two sel from here. Are you all right with that, Hiro?”

“I’m happy to stop any time. Now, even.”

He wasn’t particularly tired, but his rear end ached something fierce. Judging by Liz’s composed expression, she wasn’t experiencing the same discomfort. Perhaps her butt was softer? The temptation to check was growing irresistible when something at the side of the road caught his eye.

“Liz! Stop!” he shouted.

She responded immediately. Their horse ground to a halt. Tris and the soldiers bringing up the rear were slower to react and sped past them, stopping farther up the trail.

“What’s wrong? Did you bite your tongue?”

“That’s not it!” Hiro cried. “Over there! There’s a child in trouble!”

“Oh no! Where are they?! What’s wrong?!” Liz looked around in alarm.

“There!” Hiro pointed.

The tension quickly drained from Liz’s body. “Oh, that? That’s not a child.”

“Are you sure? It looks like one.” Was he seeing things? He rubbed his eyes, but the figure was still there, under attack by an avian creature about twice the size of a bald eagle.

“Tris!” Liz called ahead. “We’re taking an early rest!”

“Understood, Your Highness!”

Liz dismounted first, then offered Hiro her hand. “You see that bird-like creature? That’s a gerdem. And the one you thought was a child, we call a goblin.”

Hiro took her hand and climbed down. He looked closer at the goblin, cocking his head curiously. Monsters had roamed the land a thousand years ago, just as they did now, but he didn’t remember any quite so *small*. With its stubby horns, round, pink eyes, and baby-like features, it looked almost endearing. It wore green clothes somewhere between a shirt and a skirt, and it clutched a stick in its chubby fist which it swung in vain at the gerdem.

“Shouldn’t we do something?” he asked. “I’m starting to feel bad for it.”

Even from afar, Hiro could sense its panic. The gerdem was swooping down on it from far beyond the reach of its stubby arms. Eventually, he could stand to watch no more, but just as he stepped forward to intervene, Liz seized him by the shoulder.

“Don’t bother,” she said. “You don’t want to get in the way.”

“Yes I do. I’m going to help.”

“That’s not what I mean. Just watch. You’ll see soon enough.”

She folded her knees and sat down on the ground. A short distance away, Tris ordered his soldiers to scout out the town. Two horses sped off across the sparse scrub of the plain, kicking up twin plumes of dust in their wake.

Hiro watched the goblin with concern, but he soon paled as events unfolded. A horde of other goblins surged out from underground. One climbed onto its neighbor’s shoulders, and another one on top of that, until they formed a tower tall enough to smack the gerdem out of the sky with their sticks.

“Huh,” he said.

“Goblins were earth spirits once, before they angered the Spirit King by getting up to too much mischief. He turned them into earth faeries and sent them to Aletia. They’re good friends with the dwarves, you know. You can often find them helping with their smithing.”

It was oddly inspiring to watch the goblins work together to take on a

creature twice their size. With nimble movements, they kept the gerdem on the defensive, giving it no room to strike back. Even so, with their little sticks, the most they could injure was its pride. The bird-like creature looked thoroughly fed up but otherwise unhurt.

These goblins were cute, Hiro decided.

“If you’d tried to help, you’d be keeping that gerdem company right about now,” Liz said.

“Good job I didn’t. I’m not sure I’d enjoy being thwacked with sticks.”

Liz giggled. “I’m sure you wouldn’t. But it’s when they drop their sticks that you really have to worry.”

“What happens then?”

“Some people call it ‘Death Meteor.’ It almost killed Tris once. Goblins were once spirits, don’t forget. They’re nothing to mess with.”

Hiro felt a chill run down his spine. Anything that could threaten Tris’s life was no joke.

As he watched, the goblins started throwing their sticks. A wave of alarm seemed to pass through the gerdem. Eventually, it gave up on weathering their attacks and took wing, flying away until it vanished into the blue. The battle was over.

Liz seemed to remember something. “Oh, that’s right! They’re also all female.”

For a second, Hiro thought he’d heard something concerning, but he didn’t have a chance to ask about it. At that moment, the scouts returned from the town. A primly dressed man on the cusp of old age accompanied them. He dismounted, placed a hand to his chest, and sank to one knee, mindless of dirtying his clothes.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Lady Celia Estrella,” he said. “My name is Kurt von Tarmier. In Margrave von Gurinda’s absence, allow me to welcome you on his behalf.”

Liz brought her hand to her own chest and bowed in return. “Celia Estrella

Elizabeth von Grantz, granted the rank of major general by His Majesty the Emperor.” She delivered her courtesies with a perfectly poised expression, as befitted a princess. “Might I ask where my uncle is?”

“In Berg Fortress, Your Highness. A hostile force crossed the border from the Duchy of Lichtein four days hence—some twelve thousand men, if the reports are accurate. It is only thanks to the Warmaiden’s assistance that we have held them off thus far.” Von Tarmier produced a letter and held it out to Liz.

“Margrave von Gurinda instructed me to give this to you in the event that you arrived in Linkus.”

Liz took it, broke the seal, and scanned the single leaf of paper inside. She nodded to herself as she read, then turned to Tris.

“Tris!”

“Your Highness!” Tris and his six remaining men fell to one knee in unison.

“We’ll stop by Linkus and rest awhile. After that, we’ll head to Berg Fortress.”

Ever since their clash with Lichtein, they had ridden without sleep. Tris and his men weren’t visibly tired, but trained soldiers or not, their exhaustion was surely mounting.

Liz turned to Hiro, gesturing to the letter. “Want to read it for yourself?”

“Are you sure you should be showing me that?” Hiro couldn’t hide his surprise. A personal letter wasn’t the kind of thing one would show to others, even if the contents were banal. At least, Hiro thought so, but Liz, pushing the letter on him with an encouraging nod, seemed to disagree.

The letter read as follows:

To my dearest Elizabeth,

It gladdens my heart that you have reached Linkus unharmed. I regret only that we must wait to exchange pleasantries.

I await you in Berg Fortress.

Signed,

Liz turned back to von Tarmier. “How many soldiers do we have in Berg Fortress?”

Von Tarmier hesitated for a moment. “Around three thousand, including the Warmaiden’s forces from the Third Legion.”

“Those aren’t good odds.” Three thousand men against Lichtein’s twelve. Liz’s face fell, and with good reason.

Hiro’s mind began to race, searching for a way to overcome the odds, but just as quickly, he gave up. He could scheme all he liked, but there was no point—his station in this world was no higher than a common peasant, arguably lower. If he hadn’t happened to meet Liz, he would probably be living off the land right now. Who would let someone like that decide their strategies? What was he supposed to say, “I’m actually a thousand-year-old legend in the flesh”?

Well, Liz might believe me, but no one else would.

In any case, it was best to hold fire for now. He could start strategizing once he had a better grasp on the situation. He still had time to figure out how it would best be resolved.

Hiro craned his neck to look up at the sky. An azure expanse stretched from horizon to horizon, vast and clear and indifferent to the worries of men.

The border city of Linkus was a peculiar town, born of an uneasy coexistence between the grasslands of its northern quarter and the desert of its southern. Its main gate was found in the arid environs of the south. In less troubled times, the high street would have been bustling with market stalls, but now it was practically deserted. The poorer citizens who made their homes nearby had shut their windows and barred their doors. A few sparsely populated inns and taverns remained open here and there, but that was all.

Stagecoaches lined the grassy streets of the northern quarter. A crowd of nobles carrying loaded luggage milled about them. They pushed and shoved at one another, desperate not to be left behind in the city when the fighting broke

out.

Margrave von Gurinda's mansion lay at the end of the high street. On the first floor of the house, next to the corridor leading to the balnea—or bathhouse—was a square room. This room, which Margrave von Gurinda aptly called his library, housed a treasure trove of local and continental history. Bookcases occupied all four of its walls, filled with books of every kind, from ancient tomes to the most modern treatises. Those volumes that didn't fit on the shelves spilled over onto the floor, where they lay in stacks.

In the center of the room was a crude, utilitarian writing desk that seemed somehow master of the place. Cerberus hid quivering behind its legs, looking less a noble wolf and more a puppy taking cover from the rain. Books covered its top. On the floor beside the desk, a figure sat reading, a black-haired, black-eyed boy whose features fell somewhere between weak and kind: Hiro Oguro.

Hiro placed his book back on the desk and rubbed between his eyebrows with a finger. "I'm never going to live this down," he sighed.

Reading through these books felt like having his most embarrassing middle-school writing unearthed and shoved back in his face. No self-respecting history of Aletia could avoid bringing up the first emperor, and wherever Artheus was mentioned, Schwartz was never far behind. While only three years had passed for Hiro, a thousand years had passed for Aletia, and somewhere in the interim they'd gone so far as to deify him. Just thinking about it made his head hurt.

"Still, some parts don't match up."

As far as he knew, he had returned to his home world—Earth—from Aletia three years ago, when he was thirteen. Yet all of the legends agreed that Schwartz had lived out his natural lifespan in this world and passed away as emperor.

If this Schwartz wasn't me, then who was he?

There was one possibility he could think of, but he banished the idea with a shake of his head. Aside from anything else, there was little to be gained from fixating on thousand-year-old events.

Deciding he needed a change of pace, Hiro looked outside the window.

Twilight-hued clouds spread across the sky from the west, arranging themselves playfully in front of the setting sun. By that light, he reached into the inner pocket of his school blazer and took out a white card—the same card Artheus had once given him on the eve of his return to Earth.

“It does look a lot like a spirit seal...but it’s not quite the same, huh.”

He had come across illustrations of similar items in his reading, but they were neither blank nor quite so thick. He was still none the wiser as to what this thing even was, let alone what he was supposed to do with it.

“I guess not everything can be as self-explanatory as Excalibur...”

The blessing of the Spirit King was a transcendental power, a force that existed outside the limits of human understanding. As Hiro gazed into empty space, a tear appeared there with a small *pop*. A gleaming hilt slowly emerged from the rent as though pushing its way into existence. He lowered his eyes to his lap, and Excalibur’s hilt disappeared as quickly and completely as if it had been erased from existence. The next time, he tried grasping it instead, and the sword vanished from his belt and appeared in his hand.

“The Heavenly Emperor has chosen you,” Artheus had said when Hiro had first shown him the same trick.

Spiritblades are more than just weapons. They have minds of their own.

Simply by willing it, he could open a gateway between Aletia and the spirit world through which Excalibur could materialize. He released his grip on the blade and let it fall. It dissolved into thin air the instant before it hit the ground. A hush rippled through the room, leaving silence in its wake.

Outside, night was creeping in. A flurry of footsteps thundered down the corridor, drumming out an arrhythmic beat on the floor. The door burst open, revealing an irate Liz.

“Come on out, Cerberus! I know you’re in here!”

If Hiro had been drinking something as he turned to look, he would have spat it out. Cerberus scampered behind him, where she cowered, her ears pressed flat against her head.

“Stop whining and come with me!” Liz demanded as she approached. “We need to wash your paws, at the very least!”

Cerberus growled menacingly as Liz reached for her. Hostility burned in her amber eyes, as though she were facing down her sworn enemy. She clearly had no intention of moving an inch.

“Oh, stop being such a baby! One little bath is nothing to be scared of!”

“Um, Liz?” Hiro broke in. “Sorry, I can see you’re busy, but I have a question.”

Liz wheeled around. “Ugh, what?!”

“I don’t really know how to say this, but...where are your clothes?”

“Well, I can’t wear them while I’m bathing Cerberus, now can I? They’d get soaked! The towel hides anything that needs hiding, so it’s fine.”

“I’m telling you, it’s definitely not fine.”

Liz’s towel was doing heroic work, but it could only cover so much. After a moment of deliberation, Hiro narrowed his eyes to limit his peripheral vision and did all he could to look only at her face. That was hard enough by itself, but given the circumstances, it was the best he could manage.

“Could you please just take your bath, Cerberus?” he pleaded. “For me?”

He had to resolve this situation before Tris happened by. If the grizzled old warrior saw this, no amount of explaining would save him.

Cerberus shook her head in a surprisingly expressive “no.” Out of options, Hiro wrapped his arms around her stomach, picked her up, and, despite her struggling, handed her to Liz.

“Stop wriggling and come quietly!” Liz ordered the wolf, but somewhere in the tussle, Cerberus dislodged the towel. Liz turned to leave, unaware of the loss.



Words deserted Hiro entirely. His half-closed eyes opened wide. A surge of power to rival a Spiritblade's blessing began to gather below his waist. His face flushed bright red, and he seemed to have forgotten how to breathe.

Oxygen, however, is generally considered important to human survival. Air burst from his lungs as he finally remembered to take a breath. At last he returned to his senses—just in time to see Tris appear in the open doorway. The old soldier's face bore no anger, nor even remorse, but an emotion beyond description.

Hiro prostrated himself. "I won't resist," he said. "Just please, spare my life."

"I've a question for you, whelp," Tris rumbled.

"I'll tell you whatever you want to know. Just let me live."

"'Let you live'? What are you babbling about?"

Hiro paused. "Wait, what?"

"Clean out your ears, boy. I'm talking to you."

Hiro lowered his eyes. They seemed to be talking at cross-purposes. Whatever Tris was here about, it wasn't Liz. Thank goodness he'd noticed in time. If he'd kept talking, he probably would have ended up digging his own grave.

He forced his mouth into a smile as he met Tris's gaze again. "Please forget about all that. How can I help you?"

Tris looked at him with suspicion for a moment, but then decided it wasn't worth it. "It's no easy matter to discuss." He hummed and hawed, uncertain how to continue. "In light of...events the other day, I must know where things stand."

It seemed to have nothing to do with Liz after all. Hiro breathed a silent sigh of relief.

"Let me ask you," Tris continued. "What are you, boy?"

"What do you mean?"

The cold edge of a blade settled against Hiro's neck. The metal glinted in the dying sunlight.

“Have a care how you answer,” Tris said. “It might cost you your head.”

Hiro said nothing. The harsh set of Tris’s eyes made it clear that this was no idle threat.

“You’ve earned the benefit of the doubt by now,” the old soldier continued, “and there’s no denying we’ve you to thank for pulling us out of that hellhole on the border. But I saw things that day. Things I can’t pretend I didn’t see.”

“I suppose not,” Hiro said.

“I owe you my life, whelp—but if you’re a threat to Her Highness, I’ll gladly stain my honor with your blood. I only hope it won’t come to that.”

Hiro swallowed hard. He couldn’t exactly tell the man he was the second emperor—his head would roll in a heartbeat. But then, explaining that he’d come from another world called Earth would hardly be any better for his survival prospects.

As he racked his brains for an answer he could give, Cerberus burst into the room. The wolf still looked as dry as when she’d left. She must have gotten free of Liz’s clutches.

“Fine, have it your way! No hot bath for you! I’ve already gotten dressed, anyway, so— Tris! What do you think you’re doing?!” Liz had followed Cerberus in, grumbling, but her eyes went wide when she saw the sword at Hiro’s neck. She ran up to Tris. “I don’t know what you’re playing at, but that’s too far!”

“Your Highness, I...”

“Don’t ‘Your Highness’ me. Put that thing away.” Liz clearly wasn’t willing to argue the point.

Tris sheathed his sword and sank to one knee. Liz stepped back, leaving a sweet scent in her wake. “Now tell me what’s going on. Start from the beginning.”

“Liz,” Hiro interrupted. “Good timing. I wanted you to hear this.”

“Hear what?”

“Who I really am. I’m sure you must have been curious.”

Liz was silent for a moment. “You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to,” she said eventually. “I won’t mind.”

In spite of her words, she couldn’t look him in the eyes. Hiro hesitated for a moment, but then reached out to stroke her head. She seemed as forlorn as a child who’d been separated from her parents. He gave an awkward smile. “It’s fine. I figure it’s about time.”

“All right. As long as you don’t mind,” she said.

“It’s really not that complicated. I’m...” Hiro paused. “I’m a descendant of the second emperor.”

“What?”

“Eh?”

Liz and Tris looked equally astonished.

Telling the truth would require explaining everything from the beginning, including the events of one thousand years ago. Hiro didn’t have that kind of time. He only had half a day to bring them up to speed before they had to leave the next morning. It was simpler just to lie.

“As far as proof goes, I suppose my hair and my eyes are good enough,” he said. “I’m the first in my family to have them since Schwartz.”

Both Liz and Tris stayed silent, listening. Hiro continued, a little self-consciously. “I guess that explains how I managed to get into the Anfang Forest. I technically have royal blood.”

At last, Liz spoke. Her face was oddly grave. “Hiro...do you understand what this means?”

Hiro cocked his head. “What does it mean?”

“If what you’re saying is true, then you have a claim to the throne. You’re an imperial heir.”

“I doubt it. I’m just a distant relation, nothing more.”

“But you *do* have Mars’s blood?” Liz asked.

Hiro shifted uncomfortably. “I guess...”

“Then that makes you next in line after the royal family. I think.”

Hiro’s brows furrowed. “Wait, what? Why?”

“Because of the first emperor’s will, of course,” Liz said, as though that explained things.

“He left a will?”

“A strange one too.” She cast a glance at Tris, who had been watching in silence.

““Those who claim the blood of Schwartz shall be put to the proof at Frieden,”” Tris recited. ““They whose claim is true shall be furnished with a suitable title. May the Spirit King’s curse fall upon any who defy these words.””

Artheus, what the hell have you been playing at?

The first emperor always had been astonishingly astute. As likely as not, he’d had an inkling that Hiro might come back someday and made arrangements to ease his future return. That he had foreseen the exact excuse Hiro would make, though... That was a little scary.

“Aren’t you pleased?” Liz took hold of his arm and grinned. “You might end up a royal, just like me!”

If Hiro had been a little less oblivious, he might have noticed her feelings then—might have realized that her interest in him ran deeper than a princess’s curiosity for a stray. But he wasn’t, so he only forced a smile and glanced at Cerberus for help. The wolf turned a sulky cheek. She must have been holding a grudge about before.

“I suppose that’s settled, then. As well as can be for now,” said Tris, rising to his feet. He seemed dissatisfied with Hiro’s story—unsurprisingly, as it didn’t explain any of his strange powers—but with Liz present, he couldn’t push the matter further.

Liz didn’t seem to notice. “A descendant of the second emperor! Who’d have thought? I’m a little disappointed you’re not a spirit, but that’s not important, I suppose.”

She was still hanging on to that? Hiro almost said something, but thought

better of it. There was something more important to bring up.

“I know this is a lot to ask,” he said, “but can we keep this whole thing between us?”

“All right,” Liz said. “We have bigger problems to deal with, anyway. Besides, there are still some parts I want to ask you about.”

“Thanks. I appreciate it.”

Hiro only had himself to blame, but still, his web of lies was growing more convoluted by the day. He could only hope he didn’t tangle himself in it. Life in this other world was certainly never boring. His thoughts turned to the future, and his mind began to whirl.

*

Berg Fortress lay in the middle of a vast prairie. The nearest town was a day’s walk away; the border city of Linkus, two days’ ride. This was technically the vanguard of the southern front, although in practice the Grantzian Empire and the Duchy of Lichtein, with their shared interest in Lichtein’s slave trade, had been on good terms for decades. As a result, while Berg Fortress was still in good repair, it was far from impregnable and ill-equipped to withstand a siege.

The ducal army of Lichtein made camp on a small hill some distance from the fortress. Spirits were so high that they hardly seemed like men at war. A few sentries kept watch, but the rest of the soldiers sat on the ground and chatted the day away. They had every reason to be confident: they were up against three thousand men in a fort that would collapse at the first knock. As far as they were concerned, they had as good as won.

As they sat around, looking more like tavern patrons than soldiers—and almost as likely to break out mugs of ale—a rider galloped through their ranks, wearing the red armband of a messenger. He stopped his horse in front of the Lichtein command tent, leaped off, and sprinted to the entrance.

“Let me through!” he cried. “I have urgent news!”

The two guards moved to block his way. “Not so fast, friend,” said one. “I might know your face, but I’ll still need to see your papers.”

“I don’t have time for this! Something terrible has happened!” the messenger cried with no small amount of anger.

The guards glanced at each other and shrugged. “Fine, but if anyone asks, we checked you good.” They turned aside, opening the way.

The messenger hurried into the tent. Several men stood within. All of them turned harsh glares on him as he entered. Under normal circumstances, he would have withered under their gazes, but the urgency of his message gave him courage.

“The advance force has been wiped out!” he announced. “Lord Beil fought heroically, but he perished on the field!”

A hubbub spread through the tent at the news, until—

“Silence.”

A single word, dripping with fury, quelled it. It came from Reihil Lumer Lichtein, firstborn son of the ducal family and Duke Lichtein’s heir apparent.

“What news of my brother’s spirit weapon?”

Beil’s spirit weapon had been worth more than his life, even to his own brother. No spirits dwelled in the Duchy of Lichtein, so the nation had no means of harvesting spirit stones. While it could still buy them, the costs involved would empty its coffers.

“We believe it is now in the hands of the sixth princess.”

Reihil scowled. “Curse that fool. Does his stupidity know no bounds?”

Beil always had cared more about brawn than brains, but even then, Reihil had never expected him to lead three thousand men to defeat. Their intelligence had indicated the princess had no more than a few hundred soldiers at her disposal. Had they been fed false information? Reihil turned a burning glare on the hooded man who had been their informant.

“Is something amiss?” The man’s voice was a lazy drawl.

“You assured me three thousand would be enough!” Reihil exclaimed. “That the princess had no more than a hundred men!”

The hooded figure flared with sudden hostility. “Are you suggesting that I misled you?”

Reihil shrank back. “No, I... That is not what I said. I meant only to question whether some details might have been overlooked.”

“A Spiritblade is not to be taken lightly. This I warned you. Though the sixth princess has not yet mastered its power, Lævateinn in its full glory could slay men by the thousands.”

“Then could she have grown more proficient than you assumed?”

The hooded man shook his head. “That I doubt. Which only raises further questions.” He fell silent, thinking.

Reihil sank into his chair. This was supposed to have been simple: capture the princess and give her to this cowed man. After that, they would raid the Gurinda Mark for what slaves they could take, then return home with their spoils.

I never should have agreed to this, he thought.

He knew this hooded man, if only a little. They had exchanged letters in the past. Several days ago, one such letter had arrived, this time proposing a deal: one hundred golden grantzes and two spirit weapons in exchange for capturing the sixth princess of the Grantzian Empire. Naturally, Reihil dismissed the offer as nonsense, but the letters had kept coming until finally, one arrived with an advance payment of a spirit weapon. At that, Reihil had immediately gone to his father and persuaded the reluctant duke to let him raise an army.

The prospect of the Fourth Legion staying put was just too tempting.

The letters had been very clear on that point. The empire would not retaliate against Lichtein, no matter what destruction Reihil and his brother wreaked on the Gurinda Mark.

If I back out now, I'll have nothing to show for my efforts but shame.

With his mind made up, Reihil turned his gaze to the hooded man. “You are certain that the sixth princess cannot access her Spiritblade’s true power?” he asked.

A nod. "She cannot. I would stake my life on it."

"And the Fourth Legion will truly not interfere?"

The hooded man chuckled. "So I said. Do you doubt me?"

"Should I not?" Reihil snapped back. "Your advice just cost me three thousand men and a blasted spirit weapon!"

"Then allow me to assuage your doubts." The hooded man reached into the darkness of his cloak, pulled out a sword, and laid it on the desk. It was exquisitely decorated with silver and gold: a spirit weapon. "Capture the princess," he said, "and you shall have another, and a hundred more golden grantzes into the bargain."

Reihil stiffened. The offer comprised more wealth than he could have imagined.

"And this, too, as a show of good faith." The hooded man held out his hand. In his fingers he held a small, round pellet, roughly the size of a berry.

Reihil looked at it warily. "What is that?"

"An elixir to enhance the power of spirit weapons. Try it and you'll understand."

Reihil peered at the pellet curiously. He had never heard of such a thing. He shot the hooded man a distrustful glance. "It's not poison, I hope?"

The hooded man snorted. "All medicines are poisons. Throw it into a river if you do not trust me. I will not force it on you."

Reihil looked down at the spirit weapon on the desk. His mouth curled into a grin. "No, I trust you." He tossed the pellet into his mouth and swallowed. A moment passed, then he looked himself over. "Am I supposed to feel something?"

"Its effects will take three days to make themselves apparent."

Reihil thought for a moment. "I see. Then we shall march on Berg Fortress in three days' time."

"That would be in both our interests." The hooded man got up from his chair.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me, I must take my leave.” Just before he left the tent, he paused and turned around. “I trust you are already aware, but should you disappoint me...there will be consequences.”

Reihil spun around in alarm, but the man was already gone.

*

On the first day of the sixth month of Imperial Year 1023, the sixth princess and her company arrived at Berg Fortress. Though the fort was technically under siege, its immediate surroundings were clear of enemy forces. The ducal army had set up camp some distance away, content to maintain its silent standoff with the imperial troops.

Tris signaled to the sentries and the gate opened. The party ventured inside. They found themselves in a large central courtyard, mostly used for training. To the east were the officers’ quarters, and to the west, longhouses that served as the soldiers’ barracks. A central tower—housing the war room, the bathhouse, the mess hall, and other such facilities—rose over the courtyard to the north. It was this tower that the garrison escorted them into. After a climb up a spiral staircase and a short walk along a corridor, they arrived at the fort’s war room.

A map of Soleil adorned the western wall, with a world map alongside it. In the center of the room was a long table, surrounded by chairs for ten. The window overlooked the courtyard. Two flags stood beside it: a golden lion on a white field, and a red rose on a brown field.

The room’s three occupants stood up as they arrived and bowed politely. A genteel nobleman with a bearded chin was the first to approach. His well-polished armor clanked a little as he drew Liz into a close embrace.

“I am glad to find you safe, Elizabeth. How you’ve grown since last I saw you!”

“Uncle von Gurinda!” Liz exclaimed delightedly. “It’s been far too long!”

As Hiro watched them rejoice in their reunion, he felt someone else’s gaze burning into him. He turned to find a dainty young girl staring at him. Her silver hair shone as it caught the sunlight streaming through the window. With her small, round face and doe eyes, she inspired the same protective instincts as a small mammal. Her neatly trimmed bangs, clipped just low enough to hide her

eyebrows, only served to accentuate the effect. Perhaps because of her leaden gray eyes, or perhaps because of her impassive expression, she seemed to emanate a chilly air.

Hiro would have called himself short, but this girl was shorter. She wore a black military uniform, but the sleeves were so long that they flopped over her hands. Her jacket was so large on her that she seemed in danger of getting lost inside it.

Is she a soldier? She seems way too young for that.

The book in her hand looked familiar. Hiro tried to remember where he'd seen it before, but the girl stepped forward impatiently, interrupting his thoughts.

"Who are you?" she asked. Her presence had an ethereal quality—she seemed half in her own little world, and her expressionless eyes seemed to look through as much as at him.

"Impossible..." someone breathed. From next to where the girl had been standing, a dashing, brown-haired young man stared at Hiro in astonishment.

What's this about? Hiro wondered, cocking his head quizzically, but then there came a tug on his sleeve, bringing his attention back to the girl in front of him.

"Who are you?" she repeated, this time more insistently.

"Me? I'm no one. Just an ordinary commoner," he said. "My name's Hiro."

"Hiro... Hiro... Hiro...? Hiro, Hiro, Hiro..." She turned his name over in her mouth. Hiro could only smile awkwardly. She was making it sound like a bird call of some kind.

"I see," the girl concluded, nodding to herself in satisfaction. She rummaged around for a moment, then one pale hand emerged from her oversized sleeves. It held a small, paper-wrapped bundle.

"Here. A Schwartz dumpling. For you."

"Uh...thanks." Hiro took it. Apparently, they had dumplings in this world. You learned something new every day, he supposed.

The bun had grown unpleasantly warm during its time in the girl's pocket, to the point that he hesitated to eat it. A certain kind of person might have jumped at the chance, though.

The brown-haired young man was glaring at Hiro so fiercely, his eyes seemed about to pop out of his head. If Hiro offered him a handshake now, the other man might actually pull a sword.

The silver-haired girl's sleeve flopped as she gestured to herself, oblivious to Hiro's discomfort. "Treya Verdan Aura von Bunadala," she said. "Brigadier General. Call me Aura."

"Nice to meet you." Hiro inclined his head politely, a little taken aback. Who was this oddly high-ranking child? A thought struck him. He raised his head and looked her over.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Um...can I ask you something?"

"If you like." She cocked her head. Her impassive expression made the gesture particularly endearing.

"Are you this Athena I've heard about?"

"I am."

She replied without a hint of hesitation. It was only the subtlest of changes, but at the sound of her epithet, a hint of pride suffused her face and her eyes seemed to grow a little less stern.

So this was Athena, the Warmaiden, the girl who took her name from Hiro's own onetime moniker of the War God. A veritable wunderkind chosen to advise Third Prince Brutahl at a historically young age, who served as chief strategist at the tender age of seventeen. He had not imagined she would be so...small. It was astonishing to think that she was older than him.

She's definitely not what I imagined...

As he wrestled with this knowledge, Aura suddenly lurched sideways with a startled "Bwah?!" Hiro hurriedly turned in the direction she had gone to find Liz pinning her on the floor, rubbing her cheek on Aura's face.

“Awww, aren’t you just the cutest little thing! How are your cheeks so *soft*?!”

Aura responded only with silence.

“So *you’re* the Warmaiden! It all makes sense now! That adorable face would beat me any day!”

Aura looked thoroughly fed up but made no effort to resist. Perhaps she was hesitant to defy a princess—even one acting inappropriately—or perhaps she had simply decided that fighting back was more trouble than it was worth. Either way, despite her passivity, she clearly wasn’t enjoying Liz’s attentions. Hiro decided to intervene.

“Leave her alone, Liz. You’re annoying her.”

“But she’s so *squishy*!” Liz’s eyes flashed with rage.

Hiro fell back, begging forgiveness for interrupting. Purely voluntarily, of course—nothing whatsoever to do with him suddenly fearing for his life. He mentally apologized to Aura, who was glaring up at him vengefully, and resigned himself to letting Liz have her way.

Liz’s genteel uncle chose that moment to approach. “A pleasure to meet you,” he said. “I’m certain Elizabeth has mentioned me, but allow me to formally introduce myself.”

He extended a hand for Hiro to shake. His fingers looked slender, but to Hiro’s surprise, they were rather rough to the touch. This man was no stranger to physical labor.

“I am Rugen Kiork von Gurinda, margrave of the Gurinda Mark, but please, call me Uncle Kiork.”

“I’m Hiro,” Hiro said. “I’d prefer just Kiork, if you don’t mind.” This man was altogether far too debonair for “uncle” to feel appropriate.

“Too early by half, it seems,” Kiork sighed under his breath, too quietly for Hiro to hear. He politely excused himself and headed over to Cerberus and Tris.

The brown-haired man from earlier quickly took Kiork’s place. “Well, congratulations,” he said to Hiro. “Between you, you’ve managed to turn a perfectly serious meeting into a farce. Granted, we perhaps needed the levity

given the circumstances, but still. What's spoiled is spoiled."

He thrust out his hand with a disdainful sniff. Hiro took it, marveling at his prickly attitude.

"I am Laurence Alfred von Spitz," the man said. "Viscount, second class military tribune, aide to Lady Aura...and Lord von Spitz to you."

The Grantzian Empire's military tribunes mostly comprised government officials who specialized in military affairs. There were also civil tribunes, similar but for their expertise leaning more towards politics. Tribunes were organized into six classes, from first class to sixth; the first, second, and third classes were collectively called senior tribunes, while the fourth, fifth and sixth classes were junior tribunes. Tris, incidentally, was a third class military tribune.

"I'm just going to call you Alfred," Hiro said.

"If you wish."

"Well...all right, then." Hiro had been certain the proposal would turn the man apoplectic, but apparently not. Perhaps he had been a little childish.

"After all, the nobility can hardly stoop to acknowledge the provocations of the commonfolk," von Spitz continued sourly.

Hiro internally took back any credit he had given the man. "Of course. Should have guessed. Anyway, can I ask you something?"

"What is it?"

"If you're Aura's aide, shouldn't you be doing something about...that?"

Von Spitz folded his arms imperiously. "Do you not understand what it means to be nobleborn? Commoners I may order about with impunity, but Her Highness? Never." That was a rather pathetic admission when one thought about it, but he seemed not to care. "Besides, do they not make for a wonderful sight? Two lovely maidens, intimately entangled. I see nothing to complain about."

If anyone's making this a farce, it's you, Hiro thought.

In the end, he succeeded in peeling Liz away from Aura. Soon enough, everybody took their seats at the table.

Liz was the first to speak. “So what brings the Warmaiden all the way here?” she asked, tilting her head curiously. “Shouldn’t you be with the Third?”

Von Spitz stiffened. All of a sudden, he became very keen on avoiding eye contact. Hiro narrowed his eyes at the man, watching his every movement.

“Allow me to explai— Oof!” Von Spitz shot to his feet, but he only got a few words out before a long sleeve slapped him across the face. At the other end was Aura, glaring fiercely.

“Sit down,” she said. “I’ll tell them.”

“Of course, my lady.” Von Spitz collapsed back into his chair as his knees buckled under the weight of her gaze. Beside him, Aura got to her feet. She took a small breath, then turned to Liz.

“We were sent here to capture you, Your Highness.”

Who marked the small *pop* that broke the silence then? The peculiar sound of the air tearing in two? Though it rippled through the room, perhaps it blended too well into the ambient noise. Only Hiro, with the abyss in his eyes, knew it for what it was. Space split apart at his fingertips to disgorge a faintly glowing pommel. The conviction in his eyes spoke plain: depending on what Aura did next, he was prepared to draw Excalibur.

Happily, things did not come to that. “Don’t worry,” Aura said. “I mean to do no such thing.”

With those words, a great tension seemed to drain from the room.

Liz’s uncle was the next to speak. “Though for a while hostilities between us seemed inevitable, in view of Lichtein’s incursion, we have negotiated an armistice. To my shame, it was Countess von Bunadala here who first alerted me to the threat.” He paused for a moment, then continued in a lower voice. “Imagine my surprise when they arrived on my doorstep flying the white flag. At first, I suspected some manner of trickery, before their messenger enlightened me as to Lichtein’s activities.”

“This is no time for imperial citizens to squabble amongst each other,” Aura supplied. “Anyone would have done the same.”

“Perhaps so. Though we might bicker—and bicker we do—the Grantzian Empire must always be united in the face of outside threats. Though not all fit that mold, it seems...” Kiork paused for a moment. “In any case, that’s how I defeated the illustrious Warmaiden,” he concluded proudly.

Aura’s brows furrowed in distaste. “You didn’t defeat me. We never fought.”

She puffed out her cheeks a little—rather adorably, Hiro thought, smiling wryly as he looked on. Beside him, Liz’s gaze was focused on Aura intently, but eventually she abandoned whatever avenue her thoughts were going down and set a thoughtful finger to her chin.

“Hm? Oh, that’s right! Uncle, shouldn’t the Fourth Legion be here?”

“I have written to them time and time again, but they have yet to reply.” Kiork looked around the room. “Come to think of it, where is Sir Dios? I do not see him with you.” A hush fell over the group, but he didn’t seem to notice. “I sent him ahead to meet you at Fort Alt. Could it be that you missed each other?”

Seeing the sorrow in Liz’s eyes, he finally noticed his misstep, but it was too late. What had been said could not be unsaid. An awkward silence fell. Eventually, Tris spoke, his face pained.

“We found the ducal army waiting for us on the border. They... They had hostages.”

“I see.” Kiork’s face fell. He sank back into his chair. He must have known that the enemy’s advance force was headed to Fort Alt, but seeing that Liz was safe, he must have assumed that Dios was too. “I swore to him that we would meet again. An oath it seems I can no longer keep.”

Hiro glanced at Aura to find her wide-eyed with astonishment.

“It can’t be,” she whispered. “The Ogre, gone?”

Bitter regret spread across Kiork’s face. “If only we hadn’t let their vanguard pass unhindered.”

Von Spitz broke in. “We have nothing to gain from arguing over if-onlys. In waylaying those three thousand men, we would have exposed our backs to twelve. It would have meant our deaths.”

The rest of the room had no choice but to admit he was right. Abandoning Berg Fortress to pursue Lichtein's advance force would at best have exposed their rear to the larger foe, and at worst seen them pincered between the two enemy armies. They had to deal with the twelve thousand first, then go after the three—though even that was much easier said than done.

"But you routed them," Aura added. "Word must have reached the enemy by now too. It's made them cautious. That's why they aren't attacking."

Hiro nodded in agreement. The enemy had surely seen Liz enter Berg Fortress, and yet they still hadn't made a move. The recent shock of losing three thousand men to fewer than a hundred must have made them wary. Either that or there was some other reason they were holding back...

"We might be low on time, but we're not out of options," Hiro said. Myriad schemes coalesced in his mind. The question was, how was he to present them to the others? The next moment, however, something happened to ensure he wouldn't have to. Aura turned to the rest of the table, smoldering with a quiet determination.

"We'll take the fight to them," she said. Small fires burned in her leaden gray eyes.

Kiork sat upright and turned to her. "You have a plan?"

"We'll lead a sortie from the fortress."

"We only have three thousand men," the margrave protested. "We can't fight them head-on."

"We *won't* have three thousand. You and the princess stay here. Something might go wrong."

That would leave her with two thousand men against twelve. For a moment, Hiro doubted his ears, but von Spitz's proud nodding told him he hadn't misheard.

Kiork sighed deeply. "This is madness. If we must fight, we ought to fight together."

"I can do this," Aura replied. "Trust me."

She refused to be swayed. They tried several times to talk her out of her plan, but she flatly rejected every argument they made.

Hiro wasn't privy to all the details, but he could guess her rationale. First, it would be difficult to coordinate her forces with the other troops. The Fourth's men had been trained differently than Gurinda's standing army, and besides, Aura had brought cavalry while the Gurinda men were mostly infantry. In the coming battle, they would need to be able to accentuate each other's strengths while covering for their weaknesses, but they hadn't a hope of achieving that without shared training. And secondly, Aura likely felt responsible for bringing chaos to the Gurinda Mark. Hiro suspected that this was her attempt to make amends.

In the end, he gave up on convincing her to take another course. The gathering broke up with the agreement that they would reconvene the next day and the unspoken understanding that they would try again to persuade her then.

*

It's not like it matters, though. She's not going to be talked out of it.

Half of Aura's recalcitrance was sheer stubbornness, but the other half was rooted in duty, and that would make it difficult to change her mind. Hiro grimaced as he took off his uniform and threw it into the wicker hamper.

That aside, I never expected to find a balnea here...

In the basement of Berg Fortress's central tower was a bathhouse, mostly used by the officer class. Even more surprisingly, it was naturally heated, apparently fed by an underground spring. Hiro washed the grime off his skin and got into the bath, breathing a sigh of relief as he sank into the warm water.

"Wow, there's steam everywhere!"

"It looks hot..."

Two familiar female voices echoed through the room. Hiro flinched and turned around. Standing there, without a shred of clothing on, was not only Liz, but Aura too.

“How’s the water? Not too hot?” Liz grinned as she approached. Behind her, Aura stiffened as she noticed him. Her face flushed with embarrassment.

“Oh, it’s perfect!” Liz exclaimed. “Whoops, better wash myself down first!” She bent over, picked up a washbasin, and began to pour water over her naked body.

“What are you doing here?” Hiro asked.

She looked confused. “I want a bath, obviously.”

“That’s not what I’m asking. I mean, what are you doing here *while I’m here*?”

“I thought we could take a bath together. Doesn’t that sound nice?”

For a moment Hiro wondered if she even registered him as a member of the opposite sex, but he had bigger problems right now. He glanced at Aura. Unlike Liz, she was bright red and currently engaged in a flustered attempt to cover herself with her hands.

“Hey,” he said hesitantly. “You’re, uh...here for a bath too, huh?”

She said nothing, only stared at him. From the corner of his eye, he saw Liz step into the bath.

“Mmm, that feels great!” she exclaimed before wading up beside him and splashing him playfully. The room was filled with steam, but it could only hide so much. What was there was there.

“Stop standing around and come in!” Liz called out to Aura. “The water’s lovely!”

Aura stared back in disbelief for a moment, but then steeled herself and, with a little run-up, plunged into the water.

“Hey! You’re supposed to wash yourself first!” Liz scolded her, still oblivious to the elephant in the room.

If Liz bathes like a cat, I guess Aura’s more of a dog, Hiro mused as water rained down around him.

*

As Hiro had expected, Aura proved just as stubborn the following morning. In

the end, he and the rest gave up on talking her out of her sortie and resigned themselves to watching from the top of the fortress's central tower. The tower rooftop was high enough to command a view of the entire battlefield, but the sunlight up there was fierce. Before long, they were all sweating.

To distract himself, Hiro looked down at the central courtyard, where three hundred cavalry and seven hundred infantry stood in neat ranks. If anything went wrong, these soldiers would immediately ride to Aura's aid. On the other side of the gate, Aura's two-thousand-strong host was organizing itself into a curious formation.

"Do you think she'll be all right?" a worried voice asked from Hiro's side. He turned around to see Liz looking down on the battlefield with concern. "I still think we'd be better off dragging this out into a siege."

"That wouldn't be a good idea," he replied. "The fortress isn't exactly sturdy—that's obvious even from the outside. If they kept up the offensive, we couldn't hold them off for long."

"Not even until the Fourth Legion arrives?"

"I don't think so, no. Besides, we shouldn't pin our hopes on them. For all we know, they might not be coming at all."

"I guess..." Liz's face fell and her shoulders slumped, but she quickly rebounded. "Then why aren't we out there fighting too? Maybe it wouldn't improve our chances *that* much, but shouldn't we be doing everything we can?"

"Aura's soldiers are a lot more disciplined than the Gurinda men," Hiro answered. "If we fought together, we might get in their way, and if we fought apart, the enemy would just isolate us and pick us off."

"Hmm...this is all so tricky."

"It wouldn't be so much of a problem if we had equal numbers, but no such luck this time."

Defeating twelve thousand men with two thousand was almost impossible under the best of circumstances. An incompetent commander would doom the attempt from the start. Yet as Hiro looked down at Aura's strange formation, a grin tugged at the corners of his mouth. All two thousand of her troops were

heavy cavalry, arranged with five cohorts of one hundred men apiece in front of the remaining fifteen hundred. To charge at the enemy like that would be the height of foolishness...but that wasn't what Aura was planning.

I see. She's using the Trident.

It had been a long time since Hiro had last seen that formation. A surge of nostalgia rose within him as he gazed down on it. Now more than ever, he felt that he was truly back in Aletia.

Aura's front lines began to move, signaling the start of the battle.

*

The two thousand black-clad cavalry advanced south, slowly but steadily. They were the pride of the Third Legion, the Knights of the Royal Black. Their horses, encased up to their heads in sturdy armor, left a cloud of dust in their wake. The riders astride them wore black plate from head to toe. Every last one was as bulky as a bear. Their standards fluttered in the wind, adorned with a sword and shield on a violet field.

A battle cry rose from the enemy forces, but it carried an edge of apprehension. One could hardly blame them: they faced Aura von Bunadala, the Warmaiden, the Third Legion's renowned wunderkind chief strategist. There was no man in Soleil who was unaware of her reputation.

The Lichtein forces placed their archers at the fore and waited for the knights to approach. Their faces bore mocking sneers, and for good reason. The imperial forces comprised only cavalry, and armored cavalry at that, which was lumbering and slow to maneuver. The archers nocked and loosed their arrows, a cloud of them darkening the sky in an instant.

What the enemy expected in that moment—for their foes to fall, or for their arrows to break upon that black armor—there was no way to know. Either way, it did not come to pass. With a small smile, Aura thrust her left hand upward. A drumbeat echoed across the battlefield. Her men stopped dead. The arrows rained down almost before the front line's noses, but astoundingly, not a single one found its mark.

"That's our opening. Vanguard, forward."

Aura raised her right hand to the sky, then swung it down. The drum beat three times. The vanguard drove their heels into their horses' flanks and surged forward, steel shields at the ready. Their five cohorts stretched vertically as they charged, becoming five slim columns. The enemy archers unleashed another volley, but they struggled to find their aim. Most of their arrows lodged harmlessly in the dirt. The rest bounced off the knights' shields.

Could they have aimed for the horses, perhaps? But the horses, too, were clad in armor. The eyes, then, or the legs—that was the only way, but their attack lacked a sense of flow, as though their commanding officers were panicking.

As Aura listened to the thunder of hooves, von Spitz pulled up next to her. "The officers have their orders, my lady."

She turned to him. "Then advance. But carefully. We don't want them to realize what we're doing."

"At once, my lady!" Von Spitz swept his arm sideways with two fingers raised. The officers registered the signal. Their main force began to move forward.

Armored horses and full plate made for a sturdy bulwark, but no defense was absolute. Launch enough arrows and some will inevitably find their mark. As the vanguard charged ahead, several of their number toppled to the ground, where further arrows finished them off. Aura snorted in distaste as she looked on.

"On to the next stage. Ready the drum," she commanded.

"Yes, my lady!" Von Spitz raised his right arm in the air, signaling to the knights behind them. They readied their drumsticks.

"We'll seize the initiative while they're still reeling."

Aura swept her right arm to the side. Twice the drum beat. Two standards rose. Two cohorts of the vanguard merged, whereupon they turned along an arc towards the enemy's left flank. They would draw the enemy's attention to the left, while...

"Next," Aura intoned, sweeping her left arm to the side. Again, the drum beat twice. This time, four standards rose. Two more cohorts merged and wheeled towards the enemy's right flank.

“Finish it.” She brought her hands together, setting her long sleeves flapping in the wind. The drum beat five times. Five standards rose.

“Let’s see how you like this.”

The final cohort plunged valiantly into the middle of the ducal line. At the same time, the others slammed into the flanks. The enemy tried to withdraw their archers, but too late. The heavy cavalry’s lances mowed the bowmen down in droves. Chaos spread through the enemy ranks: just the opening Aura was looking for.

“All units, charge.”

She drew her sword from her hip and raised it to the sky. Her spirit weapon caught the light of the sun, transforming the battlefield into a vision of valiant beauty.

Seeing his goddess in her full glory, von Spitz drew his own sword. “All units, charge!” he bellowed. “Bring our Warmaiden her victory!”

A deafening roar rose from the soldiers. Fifteen hundred lances clattered against fifteen hundred shields. Von Spitz rode abreast of the clamor as he charged ahead. Five hundred knights thundered after him, radiating an aura of pure indomitability.

The left and right columns of the main force peeled off to the sides, mirroring the pincer movement of the vanguard. Meanwhile, the three points of the vanguard had converged in the middle of the enemy army and were driving inwards as one, like a spear seeking a heart. The Lichtein front lines saw fifteen hundred knights approaching, but their army was too large for the information to proliferate fast enough.

The armies slammed together. Many ducal soldiers were still looking the other way when the maw of von Spitz’s five hundred closed on their lines. Men fell beneath hooves and died in sprays of gore. The human wall of the ducal army broke like a treeline before a storm surge as the knights thundered on and through, single-mindedly following the path the vanguard had forged. To either side, the left and right columns did the same, barreling through the enemy flanks to reconvene in the middle of the army.

“Keep going! Cut right through to their center— Wha?!” Von Spitz’s roar turned into a yelp as he glanced sideways.

“Pay attention, Sir Spitz. Don’t you value your life?”

Aura should have been back in the safety of the rear, but there she was, riding calmly beside him. She brandished her spirit weapon with ease, claiming lives left and right.

“Have you lost your mind?!” von Spitz cried. “You’re not safe here!”

“I have a spirit weapon. Right now, I’m stronger than you.”

“Be that as it may, there’s no telling what might happen! You must return to —” Von Spitz glanced behind him only to find that enemy soldiers had already blocked their retreat. Their numbers were far too great for Aura to break through alone. The left and right columns had already joined them; all that remained now was to catch up with the vanguard and crush the enemy’s core.

He relented. “Very well, but you mustn’t leave my side!” At this point, the only way out was to break through the other end. Besides, Aura’s presence alone inspired the troops. With the Warmaiden herself fighting with them, how could they lose?

At that moment, something wet splattered on Aura’s cheek. Her brows furrowed as she looked up at the sky.

“We’re running out of time.”

Black clouds had swallowed the blue. Now they were beginning to devour the sun too, for all its proud glory.

The warm wind hung heavy with the scent of death and the promise of rain.

* * *

The observers at Berg Fortress, too, felt the change in the air. The rising wind took hold of Liz’s crimson hair and made it dance. She held it down with one hand as she turned to Hiro.

“They’re incredible!” she exclaimed, pointing at the “trident” sinking deep into the enemy forces. “Look, they’ve almost reached the commander!”

Hiro nodded. "They certainly are. It's a modified strategy, but they've pulled it off."

"What do you mean?"

"The real Trident uses infantry to open up the enemy formation, but Aura did it all with cavalry. You'd have to be a genius or mad to try that. One wrong move and you'd be wiped out."

The Trident was never designed for use against such overwhelming odds in the first place. Its success owed at least as much to the soldiers' discipline as to Aura herself; the strategy hinged on the three prongs of the vanguard rejoining smoothly to channel their momentum into an explosive charge. Even so, Aura's efficacy as she drove her forces into the enemy's distracted front line was a sight to behold. Her command of the battlefield was nothing short of artful. Hiro was grateful he was on her side to admire her handiwork. She would make a maddening opponent.

"Do you think they can do it?" Liz asked.

"Probably. As long as nothing goes wrong."

It was still too early for Hiro to voice his misgivings. For now, everything was going to plan. Aura and her knights would crack open the enemy's center, kill the commander, and escape through the other side. After that, it would be simple to rout the terrified rank and file. There was only one doubt in his mind...

What if the enemy commander is too strong to kill?

Once upon a time, he had five champions at his command called the Black Hand. When he had used this strategy himself, it was their prowess at the vanguard that had allowed it to succeed. Did Aura have five warriors of equal caliber among her men?

And soon, they'll have another problem...

Looking at the sky only filled him with more unease. Before long, the heavens would begin to weep, turning the ground to mud. Aura's cavalry were already weighed down by their armor as it was. In mud, they would not be half as threatening.

He gazed down at the battlefield, where the Knights of the Royal Black were carving a dark swathe through the middle of the enemy host. It made for a spellbinding sight, like a black dragon ascending to the heavens.

“Liz? Could you ask Kiork to get his men ready? Not to move out yet, but just in case.”

They had to be ready to ride to Aura’s aid at a moment’s notice. Anybody could make a mistake, anywhere, at any time, and all the more so when caught unawares. It was only human. Still, an enemy with their back to the wall would capitalize on such an opening without mercy. Nobody wants to die, after all.

“Of course.” To his relief, Liz readily agreed. In his current position, this was all he could do.

“Thanks. I appreciate it.”

He watched her dash off to speak to Kiork. Above their heads, the stormy clouds hung low, a forbidding shadow spreading over the prairie.

*

The battlefield was a vision of turmoil. Though it was still midmorning, the sky was dark, with the sun obscured by heavy clouds. Beneath its absent gaze, a company of black-garbed knights carved a path through an army many times their number. Their foes’ screams vanished beneath the drumming of hooves. Their charge formed a thin, black line, creeping ever closer to the heart of the enemy army, and yet with every passing second, the rain falling from above slowed them a little more. Before long, those droplets grew to swollen drops that turned the earth to mud, arresting the knights’ momentum entirely.

Von Spitz turned to his commander, his brown hair slick with rain. “What do we do, my lady?!”

“The commander must be close,” Aura said. “We’ll take his head and break away, then return to the fortress.”

“As I feared...”

“I won’t be reckless. If it seems too dangerous, I’ll fall back at once.”

“Yes, my lady!”

Aura scanned the enemy lines, searching for the enemy commander. Though visibility was poor in the heavy rain, she squinted through it as best she could, seeking the thread that would lead them to victory. Her horse's armored chest knocked men aside, but not even that could break her concentration.

Here was a soldier wheeling around to face her in alarm. There was another, staring at her in wide-eyed terror. There was a third readying to meet their charge, his face twisted into a bestial snarl. None were the man she sought. One by one, she cut them all out of her mind—and then, at last, she found him, like a glimmer of light in the darkness.

“I see him. With me!”

Though she was usually soft-spoken, she now shouted to her men. She raised her spirit weapon high and drove her heels into her horse's flanks. Von Spitz's breath caught in his throat for a moment at the sight, but then he remembered himself and galloped after her with all his might, changing out his sword for a spear as he went.

“Knights of the Royal Black!” he roared at the top of his lungs. “Follow your lady!”

The knights gave answer not with their voices, but with redoubled fury. They slaughtered the ducal soldiers in their way, one after the other, sending blood spraying through the air as they consigned them to the afterlife. Aura felt their fervor at her back, pushing her onwards as she rode. Warmth blossomed in her rain-chilled hands.

Empowered by her spirit weapon's blessing, she cut through the soldiers guarding the enemy commander. Those remaining soon learned to keep their distance, wary of being crushed beneath her horse's hooves. They were only conscripts in the end, ignoble brutes come in search of slaves. They had no higher cause to uphold, no great ambition to fight for. She would not suffer such men to ravage imperial lands.

“I dedicate this victory to Emperor Schwartz.”

Aura's spirit weapon glinted in the dull light. Shock spread across the enemy commander's face, replaced quickly by dismay.

The blade took him underneath the chin. A nauseating shudder passed through Aura's hands as she followed through, utilizing her horse's momentum to swing clear. The man's head rolled from his shoulders and into the mud. His body, huge but guileless, crumpled to the ground. Aura watched for long enough to be certain he was dead, then raised her spirit weapon to the skies.

"The commander is slain!" she cried.

Her allies behind her raised a great cheer. A shudder of despair passed through the nearby Lichtein forces.

"Sir Spitz! Retrieve his head!"

Killing the enemy commander would mean nothing without proof of his demise. If his death were concealed, his soldiers would continue to fight, leaving Aura and her knights to contend with all ten thousand of them. It was imperative that they retrieve his head so they could alert the battlefield to his death. Aura cast a glance back at the corpse—and her eyes widened in surprise.

"It can't be!"

As she watched, the decapitated body rose to its feet and picked its own head up from the ground. A thrill of fear passed through her. Whatever this was, it wasn't human. No human being could survive beheading.

Aura was quick to act. One word filled her brain: "retreat." She forced a strangled scream from her mouth. "Sir Spitz! Fall ba—"

Her cry cut off in sudden alarm. The enemy commander replaced his head and lunged for her, sword in hand. She hurriedly raised her spirit weapon to block, but the commander's swing knocked it aside with a clang. Her small body sailed easily through the air to plow into the muck, where it rolled to a stop. Her horse was not so lucky: the swing sheared off its head, armor and all. It collapsed sideways, spraying blood from the red ruin of its neck.

The man turned his unfocused eyes to Aura's motionless body. As he stared into nothingness, his lips parted.

"Know your place, girl."

He strode towards her, resting his gem-studded sword on his shoulder.

“My lady!”

Von Spitz charged to her aid, striking out with his lance, only for the enemy commander to catch the blow between his arm and his torso. Von Spitz cried out in surprise as he found himself lifted up and smashed into the ground. The impact sent a plume of water into the sky, though it was hardly noticeable in the now torrential rain. As von Spitz lay groaning in pain, unable to breathe, the enemy commander stomped down viciously on his chest. Again and again the boot fell until a great gout of blood burst from his mouth.

Attempting to save the beleaguered knight, a nearby soldier charged furiously at the enemy commander. He raised a battle cry as he thrust forward with his lance.

“Worm!”

With sickening ease, the commander drove his sword through the soldier’s face. The man toppled from his horse, dead before he hit the ground. His valiant sacrifice bought his vice-commander a reprieve, but von Spitz was beyond taking advantage of the opening. He lay motionless on his back, the pitiless rain spreading his own blood across his face.

At that moment, Aura rose unsteadily to her feet. She cradled her left arm with her right as it dangled uselessly, mud dripping from its sleeve. It hardly took a doctor to tell that it was broken; that much was plain to see in the agony on her face.

“A spirit weapon?” she murmured. Through eyes that struggled to focus, she registered the sword in the huge man’s hand.

But even that doesn’t account for this...

A spirit weapon’s blessing was powerful, but it couldn’t heal a severed head. Only a Spiritblade, with its invested spirit, might be capable of such a feat, or perhaps...

One of the five Noble Blades? But it can’t be. That’s clearly just an ordinary spirit weapon. It can’t have that kind of power.

As Aura’s thoughts whirled, enemy soldiers began to surround her. The Knights of the Royal Black rode in a protective circle around her to ward them

away, but they would not last for long. As formidable as they were, the rain would fatally slow them down. Besides, they were vastly outnumbered and, worst of all, collected in one place. Their momentum had been their greatest advantage, and now it was gone.

The enemy commander's eyes swiveled independently in their sockets as he surveyed the field. Aura's stomach turned at the sight.

"Not abandoning your men? How noble of you. You must be the Warmaiden." The man's purple lips twisted into a full-faced leer, revealing his teeth. *"A pity you are not to my taste, but I will capture you nonetheless. Oh, don't look at me so. I'm no monster. I'll set you free...once I've sold you for a fat ransom..."*

Raindrops burst on his sword as it slashed through the air. A nearby knight valiantly lunged at him in Aura's defense, but he was cut down with ease.

"...and once my men have had their turn!"

A squadron of Knights of the Royal Black barreled towards the man furiously, determined not to let him lay a finger on their mistress.

"Give us but a moment, Lady Aura!" one cried. "We will clear the way, no matter the cost!"

The enemy commander burst into laughter. *"Good, good! Very gallant! Very well, who wants to die first? With a spirit weapon in my hands, I'm unstoppable!"*

For a moment, Aura thought she had misheard. A spirit weapon's blessing was certainly strong, but the power now coursing through this man's veins was nothing of the sort. Of that she was certain. Even so, there was no denying the nightmarish spectacle unfolding before her eyes. The knights lopped off the commander's hand, ran him through, hewed off his leg, but still he butchered them. He didn't even seem to notice his injuries.

"More! More! I'll take you on, every last one of you!"

"Stand firm! Let no harm come to Lady Aura!"

They fought unflinchingly to the bitter end, even as their comrades fell around them in sprays of blood and gore. Yet the end did come. With a grunt of

glee, the enemy commander drove his sword through the last knight's chest, knocking the man from his horse. Then, he tilted his head to the sky, shoulders back and chest heaving.

"Hah. Not a bad fight for a warm-up."

Piles of corpses lay around him, marking where the squadron of knights had met their end. Countless wounds scored his body, all of them mortal, but as Aura watched, they knit back together in real time.

Aura leveled her sword at him. "That power of yours. What is it?"

"My spirit weapon, you mean?"

The Duchy of Lichtein had never produced a single spirit stone. The arid climate was the biggest reason; the land was mostly desert. Not that it was devoid of sites where spirits might gather—the desert was dotted with idyllic oases—but those oases attracted people too, and where people gathered, settlements rose. For spirits, with their love of tranquil places, Lichtein had nothing to offer, and the blood-soaked air of a slave nation would have driven them away even if it had.

Perhaps the commander had bought this weapon from elsewhere, then...but the Duchy of Lichtein had no such money to spare. One spirit stone was worth a lifetime of leisure, and unlike Spiritblades, with their invested spirits, spirit weapons did not last forever. They could break after only a few blows, and a single slip of the blacksmith's hammer could render them no better than common rocks. Though their power was undeniable, a nation would be far better served spending its budget on mundane arms and armor. Even in the mighty Grantzian Empire, only the royal family and their most devoted retainers carried spirit weapons.

"I'm curious where that came from," Aura said. "But no. Your *other* power."

"Stay your babble, girl. Stalling for time will not save you."

"You don't realize what's happened to you, do you? Or no, perhaps you do. You just can't recognize it as unnatural anymore."

"Spew any more nonsense and I'll lose my temper—and you won't like that. Besides, look around you. See what is becoming of your precious knights."

The battle around them was descending into chaos as the ducal soldiers began to drag the Knights of the Royal Black from their steeds. The unhorsed knights scrambled back to their feet only to find themselves vastly outnumbered. One by one, they were surrounded and picked off. Their numbers slowly dwindled. Blood seeped from their armored corpses to stain the mud.

“Not long now, girl. Soon, you’ll be singing a sweeter tune. But until then...I’ll have myself a little fun!”

The air screamed as the enemy commander swung his sword in a wide swat. Aura caught the blow with her own spirit weapon, but the sheer force of it sent her small body flying. As she crumpled to the ground, the commander landed a vicious kick in her side. Mud filled her mouth before she could cry out. Once, twice, thrice she bounced across the ground. By the time she rolled to a stop, she was barely conscious.

She groaned weakly. Her men were fighting for their lives. She couldn’t let them down. That thought lit a fire in her belly. Yet as she tried to push herself upright, the strength left her arms and she collapsed. As she lay there, her face half-submerged in a puddle, she felt something wet trickle from her eyes. Perhaps she was crying. Beneath the merciless downpour, it was hard to tell.

The enemy commander strode up to her fallen body. He seized her roughly by the hair and wrenched her head upright.

“Passing out already? A blessing, I suppose. You’ll not want to be awake when my men have their way with you.”

Aura looked at him blankly.

“Well, not to worry. I’ll make sure they’re gentle. I’ll still have to ransom you once they’re done.”

Still she said nothing, only stared back with empty gray eyes. He released her hair, sending her face splashing back into the puddle, then looked around for better sport. His eyes fell upon her spirit weapon lying nearby, and he picked it up.

“The Warmaiden and two spirit weapons for the price of one fool brother,” he

mused. *“A profitable trade, all things considered.”*

At that moment, he did not know—could not know—what was coming for him.

“I must thank my friend for his wise advice.”

He spread his arms wide in exultation—and his hand fell from his wrist, taking Aura’s spirit weapon with it.

“Hm? What’s this now?”

Blood gushed from his truncated arm, but he hardly seemed to care. It was the spirit weapon stuck into the ground before his eyes that commanded his attention.

“This sword... This is the one I gave my brother. Why is it here?”

As he stared dumbly at the blade, something was happening behind his back. A glimmer of white light was threading its way through the heaving mass of soldiers. Closer it drew, ever closer, arcing through the air as it surged towards him.

It moved like a bolt of lightning. No other words seemed apt.

And so, like the gleam of a silver blade cleaving through the darkness of despair—

White lightning alighted on the battlefield.

Chapter 5: The Return of the War God

A short while earlier...

The tempest raged, casting down raindrops swollen enough to sting. Atop the roof of Berg Fortress's central tower, several dozen men and women stood in silence. The air seemed to press in on them from all directions, making it hard to breathe.

At Hiro's side, a crimson-haired girl gazed at the battlefield. Her shapely brows furrowed with unease. "This isn't looking good, is it?" she asked.

"It's not over yet. They still have momentum on their side."

The enemy's formation was in disarray. If Aura could only kill their commander, it would shatter completely. The Knights of the Royal Black had been slowed by the sudden downpour, but their charge still carried more than enough force.

How many enemies left? Eight thousand, maybe...

If anything, now was the perfect time for the soldiers still inside the fort to sortie. They might only have a thousand men, but a thousand could still do some damage when the enemy's attention was focused elsewhere. With the rain to hide their approach, the ducal soldiers wouldn't see them coming until it was too late, and even if they were spotted, what could the enemy do with their chain of command in chaos?

This was their chance. They had to take it.

Hiro turned to Liz only to find she was no longer beside him. She was already some distance away, speaking with Kiork. Judging by the urgency of her gestures, she was thinking much the same thing. Kiork nodded, then barked an order to his men.

As Hiro returned his gaze to the fray, through Uranos, he saw victory ripple across the battlefield. "They've done it!" he gasped. Yet instead of breaking free, the black dragon split in two, as though it had slammed into a wall. It

began to mill in circles inside the enemy ranks.

“Why aren’t they falling back?” Hiro placed a hand on the battlements and leaned out, squinting into the rain. Something was wrong, that much he could tell, but the data was muddled. He couldn’t separate the signal from the noise.

I need to get a closer look.

He had no time for doubts. He climbed on top of the battlements and edged up to the brink. Far below, soldiers rushed to and fro across the central courtyard. A fall from this height would kill him instantly. He took a deep breath, steeled himself, stepped out into empty space—and dropped like a stone.

“Hiro?!” Liz shrieked as she saw him fall, but the downpour snatched her voice away before it reached his ears.

I’d never make it in time taking the stairs.

His organs seemed to push up against his ribcage as gravity yanked him down. Halfway through his fall, he called on Excalibur. The Spiritblade’s hilt manifested beneath his foot and he kicked off it. In that way, he propelled himself through the air, leaping from summoned foothold to summoned foothold.

Soldiers poured through the main gate below him, heading for the fray. Liz and the rest were probably hurrying down the tower staircase to ground level at that very moment. He beat them there, leaping over the gate to land on the other side. His arrival sent a wave of astonishment through the imperial soldiers already outside the fortress, but he had neither the time nor the inclination to explain. With his silver sword in one hand, he launched into a sprint. He found his footing in the churned-up mud as surely as if he were running through sunlit grasslands.

Arriving at the battle, Hiro cast his gaze over the enemy hordes, searching for the opening he knew would be there. The ragged hole the Knights of the Royal Black had torn with their attack still remained. He found it and charged in.

“Hah!”

A streak of light laid open the back of a soldier blocking his path. Before the man’s blood had even begun to spray, Hiro had already slain the next and

opened the way. The rank and file never even realized what was happening. All they knew was that a silver bolt passed by, and then their heads flew. They perished before they could recognize the light as a glittering sword.

An enemy officer sensed him coming and wheeled around. “Who are you?!” he cried, bringing his sword down in an overhand slice.

“Yah!”

Hiro dodged sideways and stepped in with a horizontal slash. The officer’s sword fell to the ground, its blade sheared clean in two. The man followed it a fraction of a second later, just another corpse in the muck. Uproar spread through the nearby soldiers, but Hiro sped onwards, leaving them behind.

The blessing of the Heavenly Sovereign bestowed inhuman speed, and he used it to its fullest, weaving through the enemy lines like a needle through cloth. At last, Uranos’s gaze caught sight of Aura. A quiet rage flared in Hiro’s eyes to see her lying bleeding in the mud. In his heart, he cried out, and space itself gave answer, splitting apart in front of him to disgorge a gem-encrusted spirit weapon. He grabbed its handle and hurled it without hesitation. Its razor-sharp blade arced through the air, severing the enemy commander’s hand at the wrist. The man reeled back, but before he even registered Hiro’s presence, Hiro closed the remaining distance in an instant. Excalibur flashed as it cleaved through the air.

He came to a stop on the other side of his enemy, the unpleasant sensation of splintering bone lingering in his hands. There was no doubt about it: he had dealt the man a mortal blow.

“So why are you still standing?” he murmured, turning around to face his enemy.

“And who are you, eh?”

The commander glared guardedly at the sudden intruder. Hiro ignored him. His attention was not on the man, but on his neck, which was inexplicably still attached.

Hiro leveled Excalibur at the man. “Once more, perhaps, and I’ll know for sure.”

“Not going to give your name? As you wish, then, but I’ll give you mine. When you’re breathing your last in the blood and the muck, you should know who ended your miserable life.” The commander bared his teeth in a savage grin. *“You stand before Reihil Lumer Lichtein, the next duke of Lichtein!”*

With his introduction finished, Reihil swung his spirit weapon down. Hiro caught the blow with Excalibur and knocked it back. Sparks burst in the space between them.

“You can...match me?”

Confusion spread across Reihil’s face as Hiro’s strike sent him stumbling backward. He glanced down at his hands, then looked back up at Hiro.

“What is that strange sword you wield? A spirit weapon?”

“I don’t owe you any answers,” Hiro replied. Internally, he marveled at the man’s monstrous strength. It exceeded anything he had expected. He had driven Reihil back, but at the cost of ceding two paces from where he had begun.

Reihil broke into roaring laughter. *“Bah ha ha ha! Very well! Keep your silence if it pleases you! Once you’re dead and broken, I’ll have all the time in the world to find out who you were!”* With a wild lunge, he closed in on Hiro.

Hiro launched forward, twisting his body into a spin. He dove inside Reihil’s swing and unleashed a tremendous slash with Excalibur—but to his surprise, Reihil stopped his stroke effortlessly. Hiro’s hands rang with the impact.

Delight spread across Reihil’s face. *“You’re a nuisance, I’ll give you that. But speed isn’t everything.”* His mouth twisted into a grin as he swung his sword with all his strength.

Hiro tried to repel the strike with Excalibur, but the force of it lifted him off his feet. *Damn it, he’s gotten stronger!*

If there had been any spectators at this deathmatch, they would have expected Hiro to be sent flying, but it was not so. He angled his sword sideways to redirect the force of the blow past him, then sprang backwards, putting some distance between him and Reihil. That bought him a moment to breathe. He looked at his enemy—

“Wha—?!”

—but Reihil had already closed the distance.

“Raaaaaagh!”

Hiro dropped as low as he could go. Only seconds later, a gale swept over his head from right to left. He thrust Excalibur forward, but Reihil kicked the blade up high. With his arm wrenched up, Hiro was left wide open.

“Say your prayers, brat!”

Reihil’s spirit blade screamed like a bolt of lightning as it streaked towards Hiro’s head—and two spirit weapons cut themselves free from thin air to halt it in its tracks.

“What trickery?!”

With their purpose served, the two blades returned to the spirit world, where Excalibur had first stored them one thousand years before. Once more, nothing stood between Hiro and Reihil.

Reihil’s face scrunched up in confusion as he struggled to process what had happened. *“What is this sorcery, boy?!”*

“Yah!” Hiro owed him no answers. His only reply was a swift thrust with Excalibur.

“What kind of fool do you take me for?!”

The blade only grazed Reihil’s side.

He’s getting faster, Hiro thought. The Reihil of a few seconds prior could not have dodged that strike. Something was strange here. Something was wrong. *And how is he healing so quickly?*

The man’s missing hand had grown back, and the gash Hiro had just carved in his side had closed in an instant.

A spirit weapon’s blessing shouldn’t be this strong...

Perhaps they had advanced in the thousand years since Hiro was last in this world, but as far as he could remember, no spirit weapon could bestow this kind of power.

Unless...

A memory flashed into his mind, but Reihil interrupted the thought.

“What’s wrong, boy? Thought you’d killed me? Hah!” He rested his sword across his shoulders and pointed a finger at Excalibur. *“Whatever that sword is, any fool could tell it’s a spirit weapon or a Noble Blade or some such. Oh, their blessing will make a man strong, no doubt about that, but how strong...well, that depends on the man. So you see...”* He paused, then broke into a savage grin. *“Don’t get ahead of yourself, brat! Aye, you’ve carved up a few of my soldiers, but what of it? Now that you face a real warrior, I’ll show you as a pretender! That fancy sword’s no better than a stick in the hands of a worm like you!”*

As he finished, a grotesque transformation seized him. His back bulged outwards, while his arms swelled to even greater girth. Looking on, Hiro finally put his finger on the mystery of the man’s strength.

“So that’s what you are,” he whispered.

“What was that, boy?”

Hiro brought Excalibur down on the man’s shoulder, shearing his arm from his torso.

“Bah ha ha! Folly!”

Reihil didn’t even seem to feel pain. With a lurid grin splayed across his face, he swung his sword down with crushing force. Hiro caught the blade with his own. He stared at Reihil over their locked crossguards as they struggled against one another.

“What you say is true...but that’s not where your power is coming from.”

“Raaaaaagh!”

Reihil’s foot caught Hiro in the solar plexus, knocking the wind out of him and sending him flying backwards. Agony blasted through his body. He tumbled through the chaos of the battlefield, only stopping when he crashed into the enemy lines. When he slowly rose to his feet, he no longer wore the unfeeling mask of the void, but the face of the boy he was, filled with human empathy.

“I won’t ask you what drove you to poison yourself with magick.”

A cage of spears took form around him as the soldiers realized who had crash-landed in their midst. Hiro looked them over indifferently, as though they were figures in a distant scene.

“But if you really knew how to harness the power of a spirit weapon, you wouldn’t need such measures.”

He swiped his left hand through the air. As he did so, a sword sprouted from the chest of every soldier encircling him. The men fell to the ground, vomiting up their own blood. They died with confusion on their faces, clueless to the last as to what had killed them.

*

Chaos consumed the battlefield. On the front line, Margrave von Gurinda led the Gurinda reserves in a valiant charge. In the heart of the Lichtein army, Hiro fought with the enemy commander—or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that Hiro unleashed a relentless assault while the enemy commander fended him off.

Space split apart and a spirit weapon emerged. Hiro grasped its hilt and swung, dealing Reihil yet another mortal blow. In the blink of an eye, he shifted to his enemy’s blind spot. Another tear appeared at his fingertips. Again he took the sword in hand and struck, then drove both weapons home into Reihil’s body. He turned the thrust into a leap, clearing Reihil’s head to land behind him, then conjured a third spirit weapon and rammed it through his enemy’s back.

It all took place in an instant. An onlooker would have seen only a silver streak ricocheting through the air, enclosing Reihil in a web of light. Hiro’s strikes tore through his foe’s monstrous body with tempestuous force, soaking the ground with blood.

Reihil roared, writhing in pain. Wounds scored his arms, his legs, his chest, all of them mortal, yet still he stood. A baleful black aura shrouded him, healing his injuries. The spirit weapons lodged in his flesh fell to the ground and disappeared.

From the beginning, Hiro had had his suspicions, but this was proof. He knew this sight. He had seen it before.

“So you’ve fallen, then.”

It was an old term. A reviled term. A word for the profane fate that awaited those foolish enough to take the power of the spirits into their own bodies.

Over a thousand years ago, there had been a king afflicted with an insatiable curiosity. He took to experimenting with spirit stones, crushing them to powder and synthesizing them into a concoction he called a spirit elixir. This he fed to one of his guards, only to be disappointed when it failed to have any effect. Yet later that night, when all were abed, the guard became afflicted by terrible agonies before transforming into a horrifying monstrosity that lived only to slay. The first to fall victim to his bloodlust was a sentry drawn by the noise. The second was the king. Thereafter, the guard fell upon the rest of the castle, devouring all he encountered in an orgy of slaughter.

The nation had never recovered from the massacre. Plunged into disarray, it was soon annexed by one of its neighbors. Hiro remembered its final battle well. He had been there on the field.

“What the hell are you thinking?” he whispered. “The raw power of the spirits, their magick... It’s poison. Once you drink it, there’s no going back.”

Many coveted the blessing of the spirits, and for good reason, but it was not a thing to be consumed. The danger exceeded that of a simple overdose; such power was too great for human flesh to contain, and those who tried would not remain human for long. Even so, Hiro recalled, there had been no shortage of those who took the plunge. Kings imbibed magick as their nations fell, hoping to spit in the eyes of their conquerors. Some even used the stuff to assassinate others in what became known as elixir poisonings. That age had been a dark one indeed.

Yet not all who fell succumbed to madness. A handful withstood the corrosive effects of the bane they had drunk, gaining bodies far mightier than any human while their minds remained intact. They had a name, these fell creations of the spirits’ magick.

The people called them “fiends.”

Even before his transformation, Reihil had been twice Hiro's size. Now he had swollen to almost six. One glance was enough to tell that he was no longer human, but a monster akin to an ogre or a gigas.

He had failed the test.

As Hiro readied Excalibur, the creature that had been Reihil surged into motion—but not towards him. Instead, it plowed straight into the ducal troops. Screams of terror rose from their lines. The shock wave from one swipe sent five men flying. His enormous foot stomped down on a soldier's head, splattering brain matter across the ground.

"Where'd this thing come from?!" a man cried.

"There's a monster on the field! Drive it back!" shouted another.

"Gyaaah!"

"Where's His Highness?! Has anybody seen him?!"

Confusion spread through the Lichtein ranks. They attacked regardless, but the monstrosity rampaged through their lines like a child throwing a tantrum, sending them to their graves. None of them realized that they were fighting Reihil, though one could hardly blame them. No trace of their commander remained in the creature's hideous form.

Some let arrows fly from afar. Some planted themselves bravely in their foe's path. Some turned to run with tears streaming from their eyes. The monster tore them all limb from limb. Men died with horrifying ease, like ants beneath a boot. Then something happened to finally break their spirits: a tongue of fire erupted from somewhere behind the back lines. Cries of dismay rose from the Lichtein ranks.

"Bugger me..."

"There's nothing there...except—"

"The supplies! They got our supplies!"

"They torched them in a bloody rainstorm?!"

With one glance at the blaze, Hiro knew it was Liz. Only Lævateinn could conjure such an inferno in this downpour.

The fight was as good as over now. The Lichtein forces had lost their commander and their supplies. Their only choices were to retreat or surrender. In the current situation, however, conceding defeat wasn't an option. If they laid down their weapons now, the fiend that had once been Reihil would mow them down. A high-ranking officer might still have been able to rally them, but Hiro had cut most of them down on his way. The only path left was to run as fast as their legs could carry them.

"Retreat, you fools! I'm getting out of here! I'm not gonna die like this!"

"Not before me, you don't!"

"Get back here, curse you! I'm coming too!"

Nobody wants to die, much less throw their lives away against hopeless odds. The ducal soldiers turned and ran for their homeland. From the air, they might have resembled a landslide rolling towards the Lichtein border. Hiro did not deign to chase them. He had a more important enemy to face.

He closed his eyes and steadied his breathing. With both hands clasped around Excalibur's hilt, he looked like the statue of the second emperor in Frieden come to life. His hair danced in the wind as the monster roared. For a long moment, he stared down his foe, and then he burst into motion.

Monsters were not a rarity in Aletia. This world was full of them, in all shapes and sizes. Some were weak, and some were formidable. As a rule, people only engaged the largest in groups. To challenge one alone would be to invite mockery. Anyone would scoff at such a reckless act, trained soldiers more than anyone.

Nobody was scoffing now. Nobody mocked the hero who stood valiantly against this rampaging monstrosity, matching it blow for blow.

Hiro Oguro. Held Rey Schwartz von Grantz. He whom a thousand years ago Aletia had known as Mars. Hero he was named in two tongues, and so he was, a mythical hero whose deeds were the stuff of legend.

Though he had relinquished his place in this otherworld when his conquest was done, now he had returned, a figure straight from the annals of history. In his hand he held a blazing silver sword told of in no legend: Excalibur, the long-lost fifth Spiritblade. Its pommel and crossguard gleamed achingly white, as though dusted with powder snow, and its blade trailed a thousand glimmering stars.

Hiro grunted as a colossal fist sailed past the tip of his nose. The rush of air sent his hair aflutter. He twisted around and lashed out with Excalibur. Blood sprayed from the monster's arm, but the wound quickly closed.

Suppose there was a creature that no number of mortal wounds could slay. What would human beings do when faced with such a beast? No doubt most would choose to run, but a small handful would stand and fight. Hiro was assuredly the latter. The notion of retreat did not even cross his mind. His face betrayed neither fear nor panic, only rage.

Still not fast enough! Still not strong enough!

He yearned for what had once been his. He was still so far from his former self. To fell this monster, his current efforts would not suffice.

"Hah!"

His anger lent Excalibur weight. His swing sent the monster's colossal arm sailing through the air. The wound would have been mortal to an ordinary man, but the beast he faced had the spirits' magick coursing through its veins. Blood splattered across his face, but he didn't even blink. He only increased his speed.

"Damn it!"

He had a three-year blank to contend with. His skills had surely atrophied during his peaceful convalescence in his home world. Even so, he could not accept that as an excuse. Not when all he had known, all he had cared for, was right where he had left it.

I can't let them down.

His joints screamed in pain, but he gritted his teeth and bore it. His repeated battles were taking their toll. His body was approaching its limit. Even so, he rained down blow after blow. Again and again, a bolt of silver light plunged into

his enemy's flesh. Time after time, the beast unleashed a howl of pain as its blood spattered the earth.

My comrade-in-arms. My friends. None of my victories would have been possible without you.

He fell to his knees and pounded his fist into the ground.

All of you are long gone now.

Innumerable swords flared into being around the monster that had once been Reihil. As his foe looked around in surprise, Hiro flung Excalibur high, high above its head.

But in the name of the history, the legacy, that you built...I will seize victory once more.

Hiro again closed his eyes and calmed his breath. Seeing him standing there, blind and defenseless, the beast decided he was easy prey. Just one of its blows would spell instant death, and it rained them down by the dozen—yet not a single one found its mark.

“Now...let's begin.”

When Hiro's eyes snapped open, they harbored not the cold darkness of the abyss, but a light, simple and pure. The healing rain washed the blood from his skin. Motes of light rose in the air around him, blessing him with their burgeoning shine. The breath of the world was in his eyes, and a smile danced on his lips.

Artheus...I know you're not here anymore.

Behind his back, a crimson-haired girl looked on with trepidation.

But your will lives on, bridging the future and the past.

It was chance that brought us together. It was fate that pulled us apart.

Yet no matter the distance between us, no matter if we'll never meet again, nothing can sever the bond we share.

Though I am no longer in your world, and you are no longer in mine.

What kind of life are you leading, I wonder?

A life filled with joy?

A life filled with sorrow?

If I could choose, I'd want you to smile for the rest of your days.

And if you're wondering the same, wherever you are...

...then hear me now.

Don't worry about me.

He leveled his gaze at the monstrosity before him.

I'll be all right.

The power of the spirits flooded into every corner of his being.

I'm having the time of my life.

He braced his foot against the earth...

...and left the realm of sound behind.

The spirit weapons floating around the monster vanished with fearsome speed. One, three, eight, fourteen—all gone, leaving only the swish of parting air to cut through the rain-soaked battlefield. Great slashes gouged the creature's skin, wearing its flesh away. A cage of white light closed around it, smothering its howls of pain, but even as its cries diminished, the storm of blades only grew in speed and fury. They became a hundred sparks of light, a thousand blazing bonfires, a million newborn stars.

This was the privilege of Excalibur's chosen. This was the true power of its blessing. Now that Hiro's heart was free from doubt, the Heavenly Sovereign's Godspeed revealed its true might.

Divine Lightning—Liegegrazalt.

An onslaught of ferocious slashes tore into his foe's body at supersonic speed. As the last of his spirit weapons faded away, a blade fell from the heavens, gleaming like beauty wrought in steel. Hiro leaped high to meet it. His hand closed around its hilt.

"Yaaaaaaaaah!"

Excalibur took Reihil in the head and carried on through, burying itself deep in the earth. A thunderous boom shook the air. The ground split, sending a tremor rolling outwards. The monster's body burst apart as though it had exploded from within. In all directions, chunks of flesh rained down into the mud.

At the epicenter stood Hiro, his chest heaving. He tilted his head back and filled his lungs with air. The rain ceased, and through a cleft in the roiling clouds a shaft of warm light fell upon him, the sun's benediction upon the hero's return.

"Hiro!"

Liz came running and flung her arms around him. With all his strength spent, the impact knocked him onto his rear. If he'd had the breath, he would have chided her, but his body was adamant that breathing was to be its priority.

She grabbed both his cheeks and pinched them. "I don't even know where to start with you..." she began, but then broke off into a sigh of relief. "I'm just glad you're all right."

Too exhausted to even speak in his defense, Hiro was left at her mercy. As Liz continued to pull and prod at his cheeks, Cerberus trotted up to him and rubbed her head against his shoulder. Some distance to the side was Aura, staring at him intently as she leaned on a soldier for support. Von Spitz was still unconscious, being treated by the medics. Tris and Margrave von Gurinda approached, curiosity plain on their faces.

"Simply astounding," the margrave murmured. "To face such a beast alone—and win, no less..." He slapped his cheek, as though to check if he were awake.

Beside him, Tris muttered to himself. "Hmph. Who in the blazes are you, whelp?"

As though on cue, a cheer erupted from the soldiers behind him.

“Bugger me, I’ve never seen a man fight like that. Could you even keep eyes on him?”

“Me? Err...I mean, yeah, ‘course I could!”

“Hah, keep talking. If you were that good, you’d have made officer by now!”

“Hoy, over there... Is that...?”

“C’mon, what are you—? Ah!”

A hush fell over the soldiers. All at once, their excitement cooled. A great thundering of hooves shook the air, pummeling their eardrums. Every man’s heart grew tight in his chest as the sound grew closer. Had it not been for their comrades, they might have turned and run, so formidable was the army that appeared before them.

“It can’t be. The Fourth Legion?!”

*

Three sel from the site of the battle, concealed beneath the shadow of a great cliff face, an army twenty thousand strong thronged the prairie: the Grantzian Empire’s Fourth Legion. Their commander rode at their head on a white-maned horse, leading them at a gentle pace. His name was Trye Hlín von Loeing, and he was one of only five high generals in the empire. Long had he served his country, and with valor.

General von Loeing cast a glance over his shoulder. An ornate carriage followed behind him, rocking as it trundled over the uneven ground. The personage within was as dear to him as they were to the Grantzian Empire itself.

He turned back around. A rider was approaching from across the plain—one of the scouts he had sent ahead.

“General, sir!” the man cried out. “I have news! Battle has broken out near the border! The Margrave von Gurinda is hard-pressed!”

“So he should be against fifteen thousand men. I don’t know the man’s measure, but I’ll wager he stands little chance. I’m impressed he’s held out thus far.”

It had been decades since conflict had last visited the Gurinda Mark in any form, so von Loeing had no measure by which to gauge the margrave's abilities. Still the Gurinda Mark's standing army numbered only three thousand, and many of those men would be preoccupied with keeping the peace. By von Loeing's estimations, the man could have gathered a thousand swords at best. That he had held off fifteen thousand for this long with so small a force was nothing short of miraculous.

"The Warmaiden is also on the field, sir," the scout added.

Immediately the situation began to shift into focus. "The Warmaiden, eh? She's a long way from her post in the west."

"It seems the enemy commander wounded her grievously, sir. Some say she is alive, others that she is dead. I could not verify her condition in person."

"She took to the field herself?" Von Loeing snorted. "She's a child. Her only place on the battlefield is on the back lines with her mouth shut."

He had credited her with better sense, but it seemed he had misjudged her. Courage was all too easily confused with recklessness, and Mars's name hung poorly on the latter. Third Prince Brutahl's whims had bested his good sense when he'd pinned that title on her. Von Loeing glanced back towards the carriage. It was the person within, and no other, who truly deserved the name of the War God.

"Von Loeing." An imperious voice emanated from within the carriage.

The general slowed his horse to bring his head level with the window. Within the carriage's dingy interior, reclining among nude female bodies, was the silhouette of a man—First Prince Stovell of the Grantzian Empire, who had last been seen accompanying the emperor on campaign.

Until its defeat at Aura's hands two years prior, the nation of Faerzen had been one of the continent's dominant powers. Not a few days earlier, Prince Stovell and his father had razed it to the ground. The prince had foregone a triumphant return to the capital following his victory. Instead, he and his imperial guard had veered south to the Gurinda Mark, bringing with him the princesses of Faerzen as spoils of war. The unfortunate women barely seemed aware of their state of disgrace. The light had left their eyes, perhaps in despair

of the future that awaited them, perhaps in response to horrors they had already seen. Once Stovell tired of them, they would likely be sold into slavery. Von Loeing could not suppress a pang of sympathy for them as he answered his prince.

“What would you ask of me, Your Highness?”

“Bring me that scout. I have a question for him.”

“At once, Your Highness.” Von Loeing flashed the scout a meaningful look. The man guided his horse over. With a thrust of his chin, von Loeing urged him closer to the window. The man brought his head closer to the aperture, trepidation in his eyes.

“What of Reihil?” asked the voice from within.

Confusion spread across the scout’s face, but von Loeing knew at once what Prince Stovell meant. “You were ordered to report on Reihil’s condition, were you not?” he whispered into the man’s ear.

The scout’s eyes grew wide with comprehension. “A strange boy engaged him on the field, sir. The last I heard, they were still fighting. The boy is surely no match for a spirit weapon, but—”

“A strange boy, you say?”

“That’s right, sir. I saw it myself. He cut through their lines faster than the eye could follow— Aargh!”

No sooner had the words left the scout’s mouth than the window shattered, showering his face with shards of glass. His screams of pain did not last long. A burly arm emerged from the gap to seize him by the face with an enormous hand.

“Ggggghk!”

The horse galloped from between his legs as he fought for breath. His feet kicked uselessly in the air. With an exasperated sigh, von Loeing seized him by the waist.

“Enough of this foolishness, Your Highness. Release him—”

A sharp *crack* pierced the air before he could finish. The scout went limp.

Inside the carriage, the princesses shrieked. Von Loeing had supposed them to have gone numb, but perhaps the sound had reawakened traumatic memories. He let go of the soldier's body. The man fell to the dirt, his neck broken, and slowly disappeared into the distance behind them.

"Did he do something to offend you?"

"He offered me a nonsensical report for which I punished him accordingly. Do you disapprove?" The voice from the carriage dripped with murderous rage, enough to make anyone's blood run cold, but von Loeing only shrugged. He was a hard man to shake.

"I do, but I'll wager you wouldn't listen."

"Then do not trouble me with such questions. Still, this boy he spoke of intrigues me. Faster than the eye could follow, he said?"

"Assuming he saw true, the boy may very well wield one of the Noble Blades. Even armed with our gift of a spirit weapon, Reihil would be hard-pressed to contend with such a thing."

"Not necessarily. I ensured that he was...otherwise empowered."

Von Loeing's brows knotted in thought. "Then the battle hangs in the balance, I suppose."

When Prince Stovell had first revealed the true depth of his ambitions, von Loeing's jaw had dropped at their audacity—and yet, at the same time, he had felt compelled to see where this man's ideals would lead. Even now, thinking back on that moment lit a fire in his breast worthy of a man half his age. He smiled ruefully. "This path you walk invites the Spirit King's curse."

"The Spirit King is no longer anything to be feared." Stovell sounded almost disappointed. Von Loeing did not reply. "None will stop me from becoming what I must," the prince whispered.

The torrential rain snatched away his words before they reached von Loeing's ears, but even if the old general had heard, he could not have presumed to offer a reply.

The battle was over by the time General von Loeing arrived on the field. Four people stood before him, the sixth princess among them. All regarded him with open wariness. He could sympathize. No doubt they were burning to press him on the convenient timing of his appearance. Well, no matter what tack they took, he had no intention of giving them a straight answer.

He smoothly dismounted, placed a hand to his chest, and fell to one knee before the sixth princess. “Lady Celia Estrella, I can only apologize for my tardiness,” he said. “I fear the rain delayed our passage.”

As he raised his head, he glanced at the boy she was holding in her arms. To slay a fiend, even only a half-made one, was no mean feat. No one but the princess and her Spiritblade could do it, von Loeing had thought, and even then only with an army at her back. To think that a boy barely her elder had vanquished one alone... He could not deny his astonishment.

He has promise, this one.

Regrettably, he had arrived too late to see the boy fight in person, but the aftermath of the battle alone stoked the flame in his belly. His instincts pushed him to take this child’s measure, to see with his own hands how strong he truly was. He fought the impulse, clenching his fists so hard that blood ran down his knuckles. There would be no enjoyment in fighting a wounded opponent. In the boy’s current state, von Loeing could snuff out his life with one hand.

Such pleasures can wait. I’m not here for sport.

It was at that moment that he noticed the rank bloodlust emanating from the man beside him.

“Well,” Prince Stovell murmured, “this does present a problem.”

The prince looked like a conquering monarch, so imposing a figure did he cut astride his horse. His golden hair stood upright, ringing his head like the prongs of a crown, and his gaze skewered the boy with undisguised malice.

Von Loeing’s jaw clenched. *This bodes ill.*

“I cannot risk you standing in my way,” Stovell said.

“Your Highness, this is an inopportune—”

Von Loeing got no further. A bolt of lightning sprang from Stovell's hand. It snaked towards the boy faster than the eye could see—but just before it struck him, it bounced off something invisible and ricocheted away.

A stunned whisper slipped from von Loeing's mouth. "What in the world?"

Impossible. That was Mjölnir's own lightning! How did the boy stop a bloody Spiritblade?!

His mind struggled to comprehend what he had just witnessed. The boy had clearly done *something*, but what? He was utterly at a loss.

"What exactly are you doing?"

The boy's voice dripped with a cold fury that belied his gentle features. A dread presence swirled around him as he rose slowly to his feet. Unconsciously, von Loeing stepped back—and then froze as he realized what he had just done.

Surely I cannot fear him! A child less than half my years?!

The boy could barely stand, but he still exuded an uncompromising authority that left von Loeing overawed. The general himself had braved countless battlefields in his day, carved his way through carnage more times he could recall. Many years had passed since he had last known the chill of terror. Had he thought himself unrivaled just because of his rank? He had grown lax, and for that he felt shame.

Yet none of that mattered now so much as pacifying his master. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse of Stovell's face. The prince's mouth was twisted in malevolent glee.

Stovell chuckled. "Aren't you an intriguing creature? By what art do you defy me, boy?"

"You must restrain yourself, Your Highness," von Loeing whispered. "His Majesty will surely hear of any further excess."

Stovell ignored him. The prince thrust out his hand, not towards the boy, but towards the sixth princess.

"Show me your skill."

The sky pealed. The air thrummed. The heavens disgorged crackling levin,

raining down a barrage of dread bolts—and the boy danced.

He struck down the lightning with unimaginable speed, shielding the crimson girl from harm. Yet in his exhausted state, he could not deflect them all. Before von Loeing knew what had happened, the boy's body was sailing through the air like a scrap of windblown paper.

"Hiro!" Liz was the first to cry out. She ran to where he had crashed to earth. "Stay with me! Oh, this can't be happening! Why?!"

Stovell dismounted and strode towards her. He carried a great battle-axe in his hand: the Thunder Sovereign, Mjöltnir. "Stand aside, Elizabeth," he commanded.

"No! I won't! Tell me why you're doing this!" Tears welled in the corners of her eyes. Flame sheathed Lævateinn's blade, as though the Spiritblade were giving voice to her anger. Mjöltnir surged with lightning as it sensed its nemesis.

"To think the day would come when you would raise a blade against me. Surely you don't imagine you can defeat me?"

"I don't care if I can or not! I'm not letting you lay a finger on Hiro!"

The pair was a powder keg waiting for a spark. One wrong move, and they would be at each other's throats...or rather, Liz would meet a cruel end at Stovell's hands. That was the only possible outcome. Such was the disparity in their strength.

"I mean only to exterminate this vermin that has wormed its way into my dear sister's good graces. Is that so wrong?"

"Hiro is *not* vermin!"

Von Loeing saw the situation slipping towards disaster but could find no way to stop it. If Stovell killed Liz here and now, in front of this many eyes, there would be no way to hide the truth from the emperor, and the man would not take kindly to the loss of Lævateinn's master. They would find themselves further from the throne than ever. That much Stovell surely knew. He must. And yet...

Does he truly think this boy so great a threat?

“Is he so dear to you?” Stovell sounded irked. “Or is there some other reason you feel compelled to defend him?”

“That’s right. If you harm him, father would never forgive you.”

“And why, pray tell, is that?”

It was a bitter choice she made in that moment. She glanced at the boy lying on the ground, and a deep regret colored her face.

“Because he has the blood of the second emperor.”

All sound seemed to vanish from the world. Every tongue fell silent. Every mouth hung open. Every gaze converged on the boy’s unconscious face.

With that, the die had been cast.

The world had been set in motion, and it was around him that it would turn.

* * *

After Stovell’s lightning knocked him unconscious, Hiro awoke in a strange place. A pure white void stretched away all around him, a world bereft of hue or shade. He had no idea what to make of it. As he frowned in confusion, somebody called out to him from behind his back.

“You have returned to Aletia, then. You must have, if you have found your way here.”

Hiro spun around in surprise. Before him was a young man with hair as golden as his eyes.

“It has been far too long, Held...or so I say to satisfy myself. In truth, I have no way of knowing how much time has passed for you since you returned to your Earth.”

Hiro couldn’t speak, astonished. He could only stare incredulously. In front of him rose a golden throne, encrusted with gems to the point of garishness. The young man sat upon it, his shapely features looking like a painting come to life. Wherever he went, women had doubtless greeted him with shrieks of delight. Even men surely stopped to admire his beauty. He sat atop the throne with slender legs crossed, his natural elegance at odds with its gaudy appearance. Under the gaze of those heroic golden eyes, Hiro finally regained his wits

enough to speak.

“Artheus? Is that really you?”

The young man’s mouth curled into a mischievous grin. Hiro was seized by an urge to punch him, but he restrained it. He wasn’t so easily provoked, he told himself. Instead he looked around to distract himself from his anger.

Featureless white space extended away in all directions.



He wondered if Artheus would be gone when he looked back, but he was still there, his eyes sparkling with amusement.

“All right. I get it,” Hiro said. “This is a dream.”

That was the only explanation. He was supposed to be on a battlefield outside of Berg Fortress. Most telling of all, Artheus was a thousand years old. In present-day Aletia, he had long since passed away. Was it possible that Hiro was dead too, and this was the afterlife? It would certainly explain Artheus’s presence...

Artheus gave a wry smile as Hiro grew increasingly worried. “I sympathize with your confusion, Held. In your place, I too would be tempted to believe thus. Alas...” He fell silent and pointed at Hiro’s chest. Hiro looked down to see a faint light emanating from beneath his blazer.

“What the...?”

He unbuttoned his uniform and rifled around in his pocket. His hand emerged holding a blank piece of stiff paper about the size of a bookmark—the very same one Artheus had given him a thousand years ago.

“I don’t know how much your dream self knows about this, but...what is it? A spirit seal?”

“Indeed,” Artheus replied. “Of a sort.”

“It doesn’t look like any spirit seal I’ve seen before. And I’ve been through a lot of books.”

“It is a singular piece. One I fashioned from a singular spirit bequeathed to me by the Spirit King. It is understandable that you might not recognize it.”

“Does it have anything to do with those dreams I keep having?” Hiro asked.

“What you converse with now are but lingering echoes I once bound within it. My only memories are those from before you returned to your Earth. All I can say is that your presence here can only mean something has triggered the seal. Something has gone awry...and I am no longer there to address it.”

A flicker of sadness passed across Artheus’s face for a moment, but then it was gone, replaced by boyish curiosity. “So, to what era were you summoned?”

Were you surprised by what you found?”

“A thousand years in the future. Surprise is certainly one word for it.”

Artheus laughed. “A thousand years! The mind spins to think of it!”

“You’re telling me,” Hiro said. “I still can’t believe it myself.”

“Remarkable. To think the Time of Turning would fall so distant...”

“The Time of Turning? What’s that?”

Artheus ignored him. “Ah, Held, truly interesting times are upon us. Would that I could enjoy them myself. Sadly, my soul is not so free as yours.”

“Hey, don’t talk over me,” Hiro protested. “Can you just tell me what you’re on about? I don’t get any of this.”

“Pay it no mind. You will understand in time.”

“Why are you always like this?”

“I fear it’s in my nature. In any case, there is but one direction I may give you. ‘Live life as you please.’ Only that.” Artheus rose from his throne and gazed up into space, throwing his arms wide as if to embrace the white void. “The world is vast, Held, and new possibilities spring eternal! May you walk a path of your own choosing! May you ever chase new horizons! May you live free and hunger for all that is!”

He strode up to Hiro and pressed a fist against his chest.

“No brother of mine could do less. You struggle to see your own worth, Held. That always was a failing of yours. Well, I tell you now: it is in you to surpass all kings in power, and in grandeur, and in might. Such possibilities, I cast at your feet. You need only stoop to claim them.”

With a grin, he clapped Hiro on both shoulders.

“I will be watching, brother. The path you walk. The future you forge.”

With his piece apparently said, Artheus resettled himself imperiously on his throne. He raised his right hand towards Hiro, palm extended.

“Now, the time has come for you to awaken.”

“What, already? You give me a lecture and then just say goodbye?”

“Rather vexing, is it not, to be treated so?” A smile played across Artheus’s lips.

Hiro could only shrug. There was nothing much he could say to that. Artheus had hit the nail on the head. A thousand years ago, when Hiro had abruptly decided to return to Earth, Artheus’s pleas had fallen on deaf ears. Hiro had never even given him a reason for leaving. He had no right to chastise him now.

He still had countless questions, but now that Artheus was acting affronted, he was unlikely to get any straight answers. Knowing that, he asked the simplest and most honest question, the one that was foremost in his mind.

“Is this goodbye for real, then?”

“One might argue it was never a true reunion. After all, I am nothing more than the ghost of a memory.”

Hiro fell silent for a moment. “Yeah. I guess you are.”

“Indeed, I doubt we will ever meet again. Yet before you go—” Artheus stopped, then sighed. “Time is upon us, I fear.”

He pointed to what passed for the sky. Hiro’s gaze followed his finger. Above them, a black shadow had appeared in the void. Its dark stain was spreading through their featureless world with increasing speed.

Arthur turned back to Hiro with the barest hint of a smile. “...you will...the truth...not tread falsely...your will...this, I believe...”

His voice was hard to make out. It was breaking up. The darkness accelerated, swallowing Hiro’s vision. Artheus’s figure dissolved like morning mist.

Goodbye, brother. For the last time.

When next he opened his eyes, it was to the sight of an unfamiliar ceiling. The sterile smell of medicine pricked at his nostrils as his mind stirred awake. A soft warmth enveloped his body. He reluctantly forced himself to sit upright. Looking around, he found that color had returned to the world. Shelves of tinctures and tonics lined the walls, lent a silver sheen by the moonlight filtering through the window. He must have been in some kind of infirmary.

Glad to have a better grasp of the situation, he looked down to find Liz sleeping peacefully by his bedside. He smiled fondly and draped his blanket over her shoulders.

And so I wake from my dream, he thought idly.

He made to stand up, but the moment he set his feet on the floor, the world wobbled crazily. The room spun around him as though he were rolling his eyes. His back struck the floor with a loud *thump*.

“Agh!” he cried. The breath blasted out of his lungs. As he lay there groaning, something hot rose up his throat. He clapped his hands to his mouth, but to no avail. Vomit sprayed across the floor. Hiro’s face grew pale, and he began to hyperventilate.

My eye... Something’s wrong. Why...?

A vast flood of information surged into his brain through his left eye. He tried to stop it, but it wouldn’t listen. It was taking in everything in sight, and his brain was buckling under the weight. The sight persisted even with his eyelids closed. This had never happened before. It was deeply unsettling not to know what was happening to his own body.

“Hiro?!” Liz’s eyes flew open as she took notice of his distress. She ran to his side and started rubbing his back. “Just hold on! Somebody, help!”

Tris, who had been standing guard outside, was the first to arrive. “What’s the matter, Your Highness?!” he asked. His eyes flicked first to Liz, then to Hiro. Seeing immediately that something was wrong, he ran back out into the corridor. “I will fetch the doctor!”

“Thank you!” Liz called after him. “Bring him quick!”

Vomit splattered her clothes, but she paid it no mind as she laid Hiro’s head to rest on her knees. She produced a cloth and gently wiped his mouth.

“Everything will be all right. Just settle down, take some deep breaths...”

Hiro’s vomiting slowed to a dribble. As likely as not, he had thrown up everything in his stomach.

“Say, Hiro. Can I tell you something?”

She whispered to him in motherly tones, hoping to distract him. It seemed to work—he responded to her voice—but as his head shifted to look up at her, she saw that the pupil of his left eye was unnaturally dilated and its sclera was red with blood. She almost screamed but clapped her hands over her mouth just in time. It felt as if he were staring into her very soul. A shiver ran up her spine, but she resisted it. This was no time to be squeamish. She had to do what she could to relieve his suffering.

“You know,” she said, forcing a smile, “I can’t tell you how much you surprised me when I first saw you.”

Their meeting in the Anfang Forest flashed through her mind. She had returned from her bath to find Cerberus locked in a standoff with a boy about her age. A strange boy with black hair and black eyes, just like...

“You were just how I’d always imagined the second emperor would look.”

Of all the emperors in the empire’s long history, only the second had no surviving portraits. His appearance was a mystery. One could only imagine his visage from what was written in legend. Even his statue in Frieden was constructed based on written accounts rather than the man himself.

“Did I ever tell you? Emperor Schwartz... He’s my inspiration.”

Even at a young age, Liz had preferred swords to dolls. Everything a man could do, she was determined to do better. It was not nursery rhymes she begged her mother to read before bed, but tales of the Twelve Divines. In the military nation of the Grantzian Empire, the second emperor had commanded astounding popularity among the people for centuries; for a young girl with military aspirations, he made for a natural exemplar.

“I trained my hardest every day. No matter how much they told me it wasn’t ‘appropriate.’ No matter how much they looked down on me for being a girl.”

At first she had dreamed of being a soldier, then a general, then a high general. As she grew, so did her ambitions. Those around her laughed her off, never believing her efforts would amount to anything—until Lævateinn blessed her with its favor, and all of a sudden her fortune turned.

The first to approach her had been the head of one of the empire’s five great

houses, House Kelheit. With his influence over the eastern territories, his endorsement encouraged many lesser nobles to follow suit. Liz's rise grew so meteoric that it threatened the other imperial heirs until the assassination of the head of House Kelheit brought it all crashing down around her ears. Before she knew what had happened, all of her supporters had deserted her but Tris and Dios.

"That was when the news came about my reassignment. I needed to clear my head, so I went to the spring in the Anfang Forest, and..."

And there she had found him. The mirror image of the second emperor she so admired.

With a gentle smile, she laid a hand against Hiro's cheek. His breathing was still pained, but it seemed less ragged than before. His eyes softened a little as he looked up at her.

"You know, Hiro...I have a dream."

At that moment, footsteps thundered down the corridor. Voices rang outside the door.

"Can you go no faster?! The whelp's life hangs in the balance!"

"Don't you rush me, young man! I'm not as spry as I used to be!"

"I'll carry you if I must!"

"What are you—? Eaagh!"

Liz smiled awkwardly, then leaned close to Hiro's ear so her whisper would not be lost. Perhaps he already knew what she would say. Certainly, no surprise showed on his face.

It was a daring dream she dreamed, to say the least. She had chosen for herself no easy road.

The light of the moon fell upon her face as she drew away, suffusing her beauty with its silver glow.

Epilogue

The eleventh day of the seventh month of Imperial Year 1023, ten days after the battle with the ducal army of Lichtein.

Hiro was in the chamber he had been given in Berg Fortress's central tower. The room was drearily furnished. There was a bed by the window, a full-length mirror to its right, and nothing else. Naturally, he had no personal possessions that might have filled the space. He had arrived from Earth with nothing more than the uniform on his back.

"Hah. It kind of suits me."

He looked himself over in the mirror, raising a hand to rub at his newly acquired headwear. A large eyepatch—purified with a spirit seal—covered the left side of his reflection's face. It would take a long time to get used to, but at least it allowed him to live his life without being assailed by constant visual dissonance. The moment he took it off, the world would spin around him like before, and a brain-splitting amount of information would pour into his head.

"It'll come with time, I guess. I've just got to get used to it."

Once he learned to control Uranos, all would be well. That surely wouldn't take him too long. It was part of his own body, after all. Besides, he rather liked the grown-up look the eyepatch lent him in the meantime. He folded his arms, lifted his chin, and struck a pose. Perhaps if he called out Excalibur, he'd look even more dashing—

"Hiro! I'm coming in!"

At that moment, a crimson-haired girl flung open the door without even a knock. It would have been worth a complaint or two about respecting his privacy at the best of times, and this was far from the best of times.

"What are you doing?" Liz stopped in the doorway. She'd caught him red-handed.

Hiro flushed bright red. His heart pounded faster. He could feel his cheeks

burning. He thrust his arm out to cover his face. “I swear, this isn’t what it looks like!”

“What isn’t?” Liz’s flame-red hair swayed as she cocked her head. It was a charming motion, but Hiro was in no position to appreciate it. He would have made a run for it if he could. Unfortunately, Liz was blocking the door.

“Nothing! Nothing at all! Just, um...it’s kind of hard to explain...”

If only he could have told her he had been possessed by a bout of eighth-grader syndrome, how much easier it would have been.

“What’s that supposed to mean? Oh, whatever, just come with me!” Liz had no patience for his distress. She seized his arm and dragged him out of the room with inhuman might. The end of the corridor rapidly approached, and with it, the spiral staircase to the lower floors.

“Hold on! Where are we going?!”

He wanted to protest that he was only recently out of his sickbed, but he couldn’t—they were already hurtling down the stairs. If he tried to speak, he would bite his tongue.

They flew down the stairwell, out of the central tower, and into the courtyard. The sun was dazzling in the sky, shining hot enough to scorch the earth. Hiro felt sweat bead on his skin.

“Aura’s going back west!” Liz explained. “We have to see her off!”

“Not right this minute! We don’t have to run!”

Aura had been staying at Berg Fortress for a time, both to recover from her injuries and to bury those who had fallen in battle. Sadly, many of her knights’ bodies had never been recovered. With the corpses brutalized and trampled into the mud, it had been hard to tell friend from foe. Still, in spite of her own injuries, she had searched for her men until the sun went down.

The ducal army’s dead had been gathered together and burned. On account of the risk of infection, the Fourth Legion had pitched in to ensure the grim task was completed as quickly as possible. Afterwards, they’d dispersed across the Gurinda Mark to ensure that no remnants of the Lichtein forces remained to

make trouble. First Prince Stovell, for his part, had returned to the capital with his imperial guard in tow.

I'll have to pay him back one day.

Artheus had commanded him to live life as he pleased, and he intended to honor that decree—but not today. He contented himself with knowing he would have his revenge on Stovell in the future. For now, he had somebody he needed to see off with a smile.

“You shouldn’t have bothered,” Aura said. She was seated atop her horse, her right arm in a sling and her face as sullen as ever. At her side was von Spitz, wrapped from head to toe in bandages. Even knowing the severity of his injuries, he made for such a comical sight that it was hard not to laugh.

“Thank you for seeing us off, Your Highness...and Your Highness.” Addressing Hiro by his now-title sounded as though it caused von Spitz physical pain. His face was swathed in bandages, but Hiro could imagine exactly what kind of expression he was making.

“My pleasure,” Liz replied. “It’s been a trying few days, but at least we’re still in one piece.”

“It’s been horrid,” Aura said. “But not fruitless.” She turned to Hiro. “Is your eye doing better?”

Her leaden gaze was probing for something. Hiro tried to laugh it off. “I think so. It’ll probably be a while before it’s fully healed, though.”

Only Liz, Tris, and the doctor knew the truth of what had happened to his eye. As far as anybody else was concerned, he had simply been wounded in battle. Aura should have had no reason to suspect any different, but to feel her gaze drilling into him, it was hard to shake the feeling that she could see right through his lie.

“Really. It’s lucky you weren’t blinded. Does the eyepatch have to be that big?”

“Well, um...you see...about that...”

The eyepatch’s unusual size was necessary to hide the spirit seal within, but

he could hardly say that. As he struggled for an excuse, Liz came to his rescue.

“It’s a big wound!” she said. “I mean, a *really* big one!”

Aura looked him over with concern in her eyes. “Will it scar?”

Hiro forced a smile, trying to suppress a sudden surge of guilt. “Not at all! I’m sure it’ll be fine. It doesn’t hurt or anything. Once it’s healed, I can take this thing off and I’ll be as good as new.”

“I see. I’m glad.” Despite her words, those steel-gray eyes stayed fixed on his eyepatch. The seconds dragged on, but her gaze never wavered. Just as he was starting to wonder if her scrutiny would ever let up, Liz stepped in front of him.

“I’ll write to you, okay?”

“Me too. Once I have everything in order.”

“Time is upon us, my lady,” Spitz interrupted. Behind him, the Knights of the Royal Black stood in formation, their numbers sorely depleted. Both the men and the horses had forgone their full armor, probably due to the heat; the men were dressed in light armor only, while the horses had shed all of theirs. The absent armor was safely stowed in their wagons alongside their water and provisions.

“We should be off. Take care.” With her sleeves flopping, Aura turned her horse towards the front gate. After a few steps, she looked back over her shoulder. Her gaze swept over Hiro. “Until we meet again...Held.”

She did not look back again. She took her place at the head of her knights, and the column gently flowed through the gate.

How strange. The sun was so hot, and yet a sudden chill struck Hiro to the core.

As he stood frozen, Liz clapped him on the back. “Come on! It’s about time you learned to ride!”

That was chilling in its own way. Just like that, he was doomed to spend the rest of his day collecting abrasions beneath a burning sun.

It was two days later that Hiro received a missive from the emperor.

Afterword

Thank you very much for picking up *The Mythical Hero's Otherworld Chronicles: Vol. 1*.

I'd like to start off by diving right in and telling you how this book came to be.

For as long as I can remember, I've only had one virtue: an imagination twice as overactive as most people's. Initially, I tried to channel it into becoming a manga artist...but as it turns out, I have zero dedication. I mean really, truly zero. Some might even say I give up at the drop of a hat... In any case, it soon became clear that I was never going to cut it in the manga business.

For years I dragged my feet fruitlessly through life, until I had a fateful encounter one day at a certain bookstore. Yes, dear reader, I came face-to-face with that brand of teen fiction called the light novel. Immediately I got excited. "All this time, there was another way!" I thought. "I can weave a world of my own with words!" But right out of the gate, I was getting ahead of myself. I had no natural way with words. Writing even a hundred characters seemed impossible for me. I searched the internet in the hopes of finding some convenient way of improving both my typing speed and my writing, and that was how I stumbled across the "Shosetsuka ni Narou" website we all know and love. Despite my amateur prose, my uploads received a humbling amount of support, which led to S-san, my now editor, reaching out to me, and eventually to my material making it to print.

Honestly, I'm a little scared by how well things have worked out. I spend every day in anticipation, waiting for the other shoe to drop. Even as I'm writing this right now, I'm still praying that there is no other shoe.

There isn't, right? C'mon, God, throw me a bone here!

Ah yes, God. And what are gods but the stuff of myth? Our world is littered with myths of all shapes and sizes, many of which have had a great influence on this work. Indeed, it was the desire to write a myth of my own that ultimately evolved into this story. It's the product of pure self-indulgence, all chuunibyou

and no brakes, but I hope it resonates with the chuunibyou in your soul. The average age of our demographic seems to increase year by year, so I'd like to flatter myself that it did.

Before I finish, I have many people to thank. To my editor, S-sama, who has worked tirelessly to put this story in print; to Miyuki Ruria-sama, who transformed the amateur idea vomit of my descriptions and clothing concepts into such beautiful covers and insert art; to everybody who followed my work on Shousetsuka ni Narou; to you, the reader, who picked up this book; to everybody in the editorial department, the proofreaders, and the designers; to my coworkers and their tolerance for my selfish requests; to my family, who have supported me from the beginning; to my grandmother: from the bottom of my heart, thank you. Without you, this novel would never have been a reality.

I'm not taking my foot off the chuuni pedal any time soon. I hope you'll stick around.

奉 (Tatematsuri)



**The
Mythical
Hero's
Otherworld
Chronicles ①**

Tatematsuri / Illust. Miyuki Ruria



Straea



Aura



Artheus



Liz



Hiro Oguro

Bonus Short Stories

The Markets of the Mark

In the southern quarter of Linkus, the largest city in the Gurinda Mark, the markets were bustling.

“Wow...” Liz looked around, awed. “I thought I’d never see anywhere busier than the boulevard in the capital, but this place could give it a run for its money!”

Liz’s excitement was endearing, but Hiro couldn’t help but notice that her beauty was starting to attract stares.

“Are you sure?” he asked with a shrug. “The capital must be pretty packed.”

Hiro had never been to the capital himself, but he knew it by reputation. It was the most prosperous city in Soleil, they said—no less than one would expect from the Grantzian Empire’s seat of power. Its packed markets surely eclipsed anything some border town could offer.

“Well, maybe the capital’s a *little* bigger,” Liz admitted. “But Linkus is just as lively.”

“I guess that means the margrave is doing a good job keeping the peace.”

“But of course!” Liz nodded proudly. “Uncle always puts his people first.”

They strolled through the stalls for a while, trading conversation back and forth. Eventually, Hiro came to a stop.

“So, what are we doing here?” he asked.

A few paces ahead, Liz swung around to pout at him. “Don’t be a spoilsport. Do we really need a reason to have fun?”

He raised his hands defensively. “Hey, I never said that.”

“Good.” Liz held out her arm. “Now give me your hand.”

Where did that come from? Hiro's brows furrowed in confusion. "Now just wait a..."

Liz looked down at her hand for a moment, wiped it on her shirt, then offered it to him once more. "There. How about now?"

"No, I... Oh, fine." Hiro gave in and took it. A soft warmth spread across his palm.

Liz giggled. "Right, then. Let's take a look around!"

She set out, pulling Hiro along behind her. Together, they spent the day window-shopping at the market stalls, marveling at the wares on display, exchanging words and grins with the shopkeepers. At midday, they took a break to sample the local cuisine, and as the evening set in, they retired to a nearby grassy sward to rest their feet. Beyond the skyline, the sun sank below the horizon. They watched it wordlessly for a time until Liz grew tired of the silence.

"It's been a while since we've had some peace and quiet," she said.

"Tell me about it."

Hiro turned to look at her. In profile, the sunset set her crimson hair ablaze with vivid hues. She really was beautiful, this girl. At the very least, in all the time before he had come to this world, he'd never known anyone prettier, and he'd had her to himself all day. He couldn't help but feel a little pleased with himself, in a way that he certainly never could have done in his old world.

Yet in the wake of that thought came another: how long could this last? One day, he would have to return home. What would they be to each other when that day came? Would they still share the same carefree friendship they did now—or, somewhere along the way, might things take a different turn?

"Hey, Hiro! Look at this!" Liz's voice interrupted his thoughts. He turned to find her with her hand outstretched. She giggled. "Isn't it lovely?" A bright red flower rested in her alabaster palm.

"Sure is," he said. "I've never seen one before. What kind of plant is it?"

"How rude! It's not just a *plant*, it's a *wildflower*!"

"Sorry, sorry. A wildflower. It's very pretty."

“Isn’t it just? Here.” She proffered it to him.

He took it and put it behind his ear. “Um...how do I look?”

“No, silly! You’re supposed to put it on me!”

“Oh! Right! Sorry!” Flustered, he took the flower out from behind his ear and slipped it into Liz’s hair.

A smile blossomed on her face. “So? How do I look?

Nobody in the world could wear it better—is what he would have said if he’d had the nerve. As it was, he could only nod. She smiled happily regardless.

“Why, thank you. If only it could stay beautiful forever...”

Hiro nodded in agreement, but a part of him couldn’t help but feel otherwise. Time was precious because it was finite. It was only because their days were limited that human beings strove to make the most of what they had.

Eventually, he would forget this moment, but then, all things were forgotten in the end. That was the way of the world, and he saw no reason to lament it. After all, though this day would someday fade from his memory, the truth of its happening would never change.

Lævateinn’s Blessing

Hiro stepped out of his tent and into the morning chill. It was his third morning in the mountains. Scree covered the ground, a carpet of rocks of all sizes from tiny pebbles to great chunks. He set out up the trail, breathing white fog into the frigid air.

A yawn escaped him as he walked. He had slept poorly every night since entering the mountains. The cause last night had been the same as the night before and the night before that.

He glanced back at the tent from which he had just emerged. It stood far larger than those around it—not surprising, seeing as it belonged to the sixth princess.

One of the sentries called out to him as he passed. “Sleep well?” The man

spat. “Bah, what am I saying? ’Course you didn’t.”

“You can say that again,” Hiro replied, wondering if he was imagining the edge to the man’s voice. “I hardly slept a wink.”

“You little—” Anger flashed in the sentry’s eyes. He seemed to be inches away from seizing Hiro by the lapels. “No, don’t let him get to you. Calm thoughts. Calm thoughts.”

Alarmed, Hiro decided to make a break for it. A cry came after him—“Oy! I’m not done with you!”—but he didn’t look back, plunging straight into the forest. He kept running for quite some time before he slowed to a stop.

“I doubt he’ll follow me this far,” he said to himself.

At that moment, his ears picked up the faint gurgling of water. Perhaps there was a spring nearby, or a waterfall? His curiosity piqued, he set out to find the source.

The trees thinned as he progressed. The morning sunlight filtering through the branches above grew stronger as the canopy became sparser, dispelling the night’s clinging vestiges. Eventually, Hiro emerged from the foliage to find himself standing before a small spring.

“Whoa...” he breathed.

Birdsong trickled down from the branches overhead. The trees rustled as they swayed in the breeze. Wildflowers framed the spring in an array of vibrant colors as he approached.

“This must be my lucky day. I could do with a wash.”

If only he’d brought a bucket, but no such luck. He made a mental note to tell the rest of the camp once he got back. The road ahead would be that much easier with a chance to stock up on fresh water.

He plunged his hands into the spring and leaned his face close to the surface. The icy water seemed to sap the warmth from his fingers. He winced at the cold but did his best to ignore the pain. As he scooped up a handful, the center of the spring suddenly erupted with a tremendous splash.

“Huh?”

Hiro watched, dumbfounded, as something shattered the surface—a mermaid, he thought for a second, before he recognized the figure as the sixth princess.

“Ahh, that was wonderful!” Liz sighed contentedly.

Hiro had felt the water for himself, and it was far too cold for her to be so nonchalant about it. That was odd, though not half as odd as the fact that she was stark naked.

“What do you think you’re playing at?” he exclaimed.

Liz saw him and beamed. “Oh, Hiro! I didn’t realize you were up!”

Where were her clothes? Wasn’t she cold? Shouldn’t she be more embarrassed about being seen in the nude? Hiro didn’t know where to start.

“Can I ask something?” he ventured.

“Ask away!”

“Aren’t you cold?”

The question of her nakedness could wait, he decided.

Liz grinned. “Not a problem. You can thank Lævateinn’s blessing for that.”

She heaved herself from the pool and sat down on the grass beside him. Hiro found himself screwing his eyes closed. He’d already seen everything there was to see, but even so, he didn’t want to stare.

“What’s wrong? Still sleepy?” Liz’s chilly palm touched his cheek. Her fingers gently traced his eyelids.

Hiro’s heart felt ready to explode in his chest. He couldn’t trust himself not to lose control if he opened his eyes. Summoning every last ounce of restraint in his body, he shook his head.

“Are you sure? Then why do you have your eyes closed?”

Liz’s warm breath tickled his ear, but he couldn’t possibly give her an answer. Realizing that he was bound for disaster, he did the only thing he could think of to cool himself—or at least, one particular part of himself—down: he snapped his eyes open and, taking care not to look at Liz, flung himself into the icy pool.

“Hiro?! Are you crazy?!”

Liz cried out in astonishment as he floated feebly back to the surface, his teeth chattering.

The Archpriestess, the Princess, and the Boy

Within the depths of Frieden was a dining hall separate from the one open to the laity; a dining hall forbidden to all but the knight-priestesses of the temple complex. The archpriestess took her meals there while the apprentice priestesses waited on their seniors as serving staff. It was, in a sense, a training ground, and it was there that the morning found Hiro and Liz eating breakfast.

Liz, as usual, was trying to feed Hiro from her plate. “Go on, try a bite!” she said, brandishing a chunk of meat covered in a sweet sauce. “It’s delicious!”

Hiro shook his head. “I don’t need to. I’ve already got plenty.”

He had exactly as much as Liz, in fact. Their plates were identical. They had no need to share, but that didn’t seem to make her any less insistent.

“Oh, stop complaining and take it. Nobody likes a picky eater.”

“That’s not what I’m—”

Whatever Hiro was going to say was stifled by an opportunely thrust chunk of meat. With choking being the alternative, he chewed and swallowed. It *was* good, he had to admit. The savory juices of the meat and the sweetness of the sauce mingled delightfully in his mouth.

Liz peered into his eyes from uncomfortably close range. “See? Isn’t it tasty?”

“Sure, but I’ve still got my own.”

“That’s for you to feed me. Here!” Liz opened her mouth expectantly. Hiro’s hands started to do as they were told before his brain caught up. At that moment, a slender hand plucked his fork from his grasp and slipped the chunk of meat into Liz’s mouth. Hiro spun around to see a beautiful woman standing demurely beside them.

“Your Grace?”

The archpriestess inclined her head imperceptibly. “I feared that your food might get cold.” She wore her customary smile, but there was a tightness around her mouth that Hiro did not think was entirely his imagination.

Liz stood up, glaring stared daggers at the álfen woman. “Hiro has to do it, or there’s no point. Is that a problem?”

The archpriestess seemed to glide silently across the floor as she drew closer. “You must remember, only women are permitted to serve in the sacred residence of the Spirit King. I worry that the sight of you cavorting may have an adverse influence on our priestesses.”

Hiro looked around to find a dining hall full of women staring at them, red-faced. Even the servers—apprentice priestesses, he assumed—looked scandalized.

Liz must have noticed too, because her expression quickly turned apologetic. “Of course. Sorry,” she said, scratching her cheek awkwardly. She gave in quickly, Hiro noticed. She was evidently conscious of the debt she owed the archpriestess.

Virtually all of the priestesses in Frieden had entered into service as young children and had thus led sheltered lives. Many of the apprentices didn’t even know of the existence of another sex. Their quarters were normally forbidden to men entirely, although Hiro had been invited that morning for reasons he couldn’t quite fathom. In that sense, it was unsurprising that he was attracting stares.

“Please, do not allow me to interrupt your meal,” the archpriestess said. The tall álf seated herself next to Hiro, while Liz returned to her chair on his other side. Sandwiched between the two of them, Hiro began to squirm.

The archpriestess took Hiro’s fork in her slender fingers. “This is perhaps the finest dish our kitchens serve. Would you care for a bite?”

Hiro sighed weakly. Why was the archpriestess, of all people, joining in with this nonsense?

Unsurprisingly, Liz did not take the challenge lying down. “Oh, so it’s fine for *you* to feed him, is it?!”

“But of course. The archpriestess of Frieden must attend to the needs of her guests.”

“Oh, really? Won’t you set a bad example for your priestesses?”

“Not at all. For some unknown stranger to feed Lord Hiro from her plate would be scandalous, but all recognize my doing so as an act of hospitality.”

For a moment, Liz frowned in confusion—unsurprisingly, as the argument made no sense—but she soon snapped back. “I am the sixth princess of the Grantzian Empire, not some vagrant!”

That was her problem? Hiro sighed. He couldn’t help but note that he had hardly eaten a proper meal since arriving in this world. Apparently, the jury was still out on whether he would ever again know what satiety felt like.

“Surely nobody would think an imperial princess was up to anything untoward,” Liz said over his head.

“Your title is of no relevance.” the archpriestess replied. “Here in the Spirit King’s sanctum, my authority supersedes that of common folk, nobility, and royalty alike.”

“That’s ridiculous!”

“I assure you, it is the truth.”

From the sound of it, a full stomach wasn’t on the horizon anytime soon.

Memories of a Knight

“Old bugger hits like a horse,” Dios grouched, rubbing his cheek. He plunged his towel into the spring and soaked it through with water. His own face stared up at him with ill-tempered eyes. He offered the reflection a crooked grin. Leather armor lay on his chest, looking fresh from the tanner. A spear rested at his side, its tip glinting as it caught the sunlight. Together, they constituted standard issue equipment for a new recruit in the imperial army.

“What am I doing here, anyway?” he muttered.

Until a few days ago, he had been one of many urchins prowling the back

alleys. Fighting and stealing had been the order of the day. It had been a robbery like any other that had changed it all—an ill-advised attempt to steal food from a musclebound old man named Tris. Looking back on it now, he could only assume that hunger had driven him half-mad or he would have picked an easier target. The old soldier had beaten him half to death and then, upon learning how he lived, forced him to join the imperial army.

Dios pressed the cool towel to his swollen cheek and scowled. “Ought to be going.”

Tris would be angry if he took too long. Not that it was the old man’s anger he feared; it was his fists.

As he trudged towards the training ground, a young girl caught his eye. She stood with her head bowed, holding a wooden training sword, and seemed to be crying. At first he thought better of getting involved, but his feet carried him towards her regardless. He couldn’t ignore somebody in need.

“What are you doing here, eh?” he asked, sighing internally at himself.

The girl looked up with a surprised noise. Dios’s brow furrowed as he saw her face. He knew her from somewhere, of that he was certain... Ah, yes, of course. She had been part of the emperor’s train on his visit several days prior. What business did a princess of the empire have here? He ought to ask her.

“I said, what’s a brat like you doing here?”

The girl pursed her lips. “Watching the ants.”

“That so?”

Silence fell between them once more. So, she had not been crying, simply staring at the ground. He was still none the wiser as to why she was there. As he wondered what to do, the girl spoke again.

“You look very old. Are you a soldier?”

“Wha—?!” Dios spluttered. Certainly, he looked older than his years, but this girl seemed to think he was as old as Tris. He dragged an exasperated hand across his face. “Yes, I’m a soldier. A *new* soldier.” He took care to emphasize the second part.

“Really?!” The princess stood bolt upright, her eyes sparkling. He had gotten her attention, and he had a feeling it was not because of his age.

“Really.”

“Can you teach me how to fight?” She raised her wooden sword. A fierce determination burned in her eyes.

Dios’s first thought was to refuse, but he could hardly turn down a princess of the empire. If Tris heard of it, he would be nursing the bruises for weeks.

“I’m a hard taskmaster,” he warned her.

“Good!”

He assumed that she would soon grow bored or else give up after the training grew too demanding. To his surprise, however, she returned the next day, and the day after that. Their arrangement did not last long; when Tris found out about it, he beat Dios to within an inch of his life. Yet that was not the end of their lessons. From then on, Dios and Tris trained the princess together.

The years passed, the seasons turned, and the sixth princess was blessed with Lævateinn’s favor. The emperor duly granted her the rank of major general. For a time, her star was on the rise, but everything came undone when her political rivals joined forces against her. Dios wept bitter tears then, knowing that he was powerless to stop her ongoing tragedy. He could lend her his shoulder, but he could not walk by her side.

After the news came of her reassignment, she took to sneaking away to the forest where she could take refuge from her woes. On the eve of her departure, she returned with a strange black-haired boy at her side, and her long-lost smile finally returned to her face. The boy offered to join her on her journey. Dios respected that. The boy had guts. Well, that or he was a fool.

“Listen well, boy.”

“M-Me?”

“We will meet again at Berg Fortress. Until then, take care.”

“Of course. You too!”

“Hmph. I’m not the one you should be worried about. Besides, you’ll have

your work cut out for you once you reach the fortress.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I mean I’m going to train you up into a real soldier.”

He would say no goodbyes this day. This would not be farewell.

“Take care of her for me, eh?”

With that, Dios hefted his spear and turned away.

Aura in the Baths

This day found Hiro relaxing in the natural hot spring on the bottommost floor of Berg Fortress. In fact, many days did. The pleasure of the warm water was nothing short of addictive; he would have stayed submerged forever if he could have. Before coming to this world, he had never failed to bathe three times a day: morning, noon, and night.

He sighed blissfully. “I’m in heaven...”

As he sat in silence, happily soaking, there came a click from the changing room door. He glanced towards the noise, expecting to see one of the soldiers. He found something else entirely: a petite girl glared back at him with lead-gray eyes. Perhaps she was aghast; perhaps she was furious. She had clapped her hands over her most sensitive regions, but that only had the effect of stoking Hiro’s base instincts.

Finally, Aura spoke. “Did you plan this?”

Hiro shook his head furiously. “No! How would I...? I should be asking *you* that!”

Aura puffed out her cheeks. “You’re the one who peeped on me.”

That was slander and she knew it. In the first place, it had been her who had walked in on him.

“Didn’t you see my clothes in the changing room?” he asked.

“They weren’t there.”

“Now you’re just lying!”

“They were *not*!” Aura gestured angrily, forgetting what her arms had been covering.

Hiro averted his eyes, but he would be damned if he was going to let these accusations go unchallenged.

“Yes they *were*! I left them on the—”

Shelf. He had left them on the shelf. Aura was even shorter than he was. Could she have seen them all the way up there? Almost certainly not, but he couldn’t point that out without hurting her. Hiro was hardly tall himself. He knew exactly how much it would sting to be told that her height was at fault. Aside from anything else, Aura had already passed her growth spurt—it was unlikely that she would grow any taller, and her chest would forever remain as flat as a board. She was condemned to be pint-sized for life.

“Sorry,” he said. “It won’t happen again.”

The words came easily from his lips. His mouth relaxed into a serene smile. Next to the pain that Aura must bear, all his indignation suddenly seemed trivial.

Aura’s reaction, however, was not what he expected. She paled and drew back. A small shriek slipped from her mouth. Hiro furrowed his brow in confusion.

“Stop *grinning* at me,” she said.

“No, that’s not... I’m smiling! It’s just a regular smile!”

She must have mistaken his smile of compassion for a lecherous leer. Flustered, he stood up from the bath. Aura expression instantly turned mortified. Her eyes were glued to Hiro’s crotch.

“What *is* that?” She pointed with a trembling finger. With a high-pitched scream, Hiro dove back below the waterline.

Aura approached the edge of the bath on all fours. “Show me again.”

“Absolutely not!”

“You owe me from before. Show me.”

“When did you get so aggressive?! What happened to you being all bashful?!”

“I’m curious.” Aura cocked her head innocently. “I’ve never seen one before.”

“Wait, really?” Hiro froze midprotest. Had she never taken a bath with her father? Had she not learned these things at school? Did she really not know what she had seen?

“Really. This is my first time seeing male genitals.”

“So you *do* know!” More fool him for bothering to be concerned. If anything, he was the one on the back foot now. To hear the word ‘genitals’ said to his face was surprisingly embarrassing.

“Show me.”

“No!”

And so his tug-of-war with Aura continued until the heat of the bath made him pass out.

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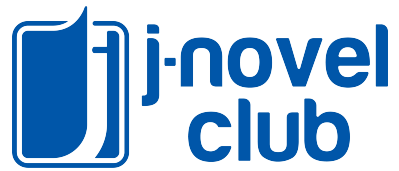
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by Tatematsuri

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